

Belgium: Interim government appointed

Paul Bond
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After six months without a government, the king of Belgium has appointed an interim government in a bid to break the political impasse. The government, headed by ousted Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, is charged with overseeing budget decisions. The appointment indicates an intensification of the crisis wracking the country.

While trade and budget expenses are administered nationally, the Belgian electoral system is organised by language groups, with separate parties in the richer Dutch-speaking north of the country (Flanders) and the French-speaking south (Wallonie). Electors vote for language parties, while the national federal government is composed of coalitions of these parties.

Around 6 million of Belgium's 10.5 million population live in Flanders. There are around 4 million people in Wallonie, and also a small German-speaking community on the eastern border of Wallonie. The capital, Brussels, is a predominantly French-speaking city in the Flemish province of Brabant. Close to the language border, Brussels has separate community status in Belgium's complex federal structure.

Last year's June 10 election was won by an alliance of the right-wing Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), under Yves Leterme, and the Flemish-nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA). The big losers were Verhofstadt's Flemish Liberal Party (Open VLD), and the Walloon Socialist Party (PS) of Elio Di Rupo.

Leterme was charged with forming a new government, but attempts to produce a coalition floundered for months over proposals to extend regional control of justice, taxation, transport, healthcare, employment and immigration, which are currently federally controlled. Across Belgium, Christian Democrats and Liberals had taken 81 of the 150 parliamentary seats, but this was not enough to effect the constitutional change required to satisfy demands for greater regional autonomy.

Verhofstadt's administration continued as a caretaker government. It was able to enact legislation already passed, such as deploying Belgian troops in Chad and extending the term of duty for troops in Lebanon under UN mandates, but had no authority to vote new legislation or set budgets.

Setting budgets was the main concern. The European Commission had warned that the political crisis was beginning to impact adversely on the economy. Inflation within the Euro zone, to which Belgium belongs, has just reached its highest level in over six years, thanks in part to hikes in oil prices. Public debt stands at 87 percent of GDP. The Central Bank is warning that inflation is likely to hit its highest level for a decade in the coming year, and economic growth will be smaller than previously predicted.

Belgium is facing an impending social crisis. One in seven of the 10.5 million population lives at or below the poverty line. For single people this is set at €822 (around US\$1,200) per month. Around

78,000 people, a rising number of them in Brussels, currently claim the minimum subsistence benefit. Even with a recent increase, this will still leave claimants below the poverty line, as for single people it will only rise to €683 per month. Unemployment in Wallonie is over 17 percent. In Flanders it currently stands at around 9 percent.

There have been sharp rises in the costs of food and fuel. Potato prices have risen 30 percent over the recent period. Electricity prices rose 11 percent between 2006 and 2007. Rail workers have waged a series of recent strikes against increased workloads.

The response from large sections of the Flemish bourgeoisie has been to call for secession, or at least greater autonomy—particularly in setting taxation. The victorious parties last June, the CD&V and the moderate nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA), both campaigned on extending regional autonomy. The racist and xenophobic Vlaams Belang (VB-Flemish Interest, formerly Vlaams Blok), demands full separation.

For much of its early history, the Belgian economy was driven by a combination of colonial wealth from the Belgian Congo, and Walloon heavy industry, in particular coal and steel. Throughout this period the Belgian ruling class was mostly French-speaking. Flanders, although it had pockets of heavy industry, remained largely agricultural.

Since the early 1960s that situation has changed drastically. Belgium withdrew from the Congo in 1960, and Walloon industry has collapsed. The worked-out coal mines could not compete against new energy sources. The steel industry was hard hit by recession and could not compete against newly industrialised nations.

Flanders, in contrast, became a centre for new technologies, able to attract foreign investment and maintain high levels of employment. Flanders now accounts for some 60 percent of the country's GDP and over 80 percent of exports.

As the disparity has increased there have been repeated calls for further extending the regional autonomy. In particular, Flemish politicians want to cut loose from federal taxation subsidies to Wallonie. Around 15 percent of Walloon regional income comes from taxation subsidies.

This desire to cut social welfare provision is not confined to ending funding from one region to another. All the Flemish nationalist parties agree on the necessity to curtail unemployment payments and force unemployed workers into low-paid jobs. Any independent Flanders would have to make itself more attractive to foreign investment. This could only be done by offering up a cheap and skilled workforce, with low overheads. When VB spokesman Frank Vanhecke blames Wallonie's crisis on the region's supposedly "socialistic" economy, he is simply more honest than other Flemish politicians about their economic agenda.

The Walloon bourgeoisie oppose any further devolution of power. Two years ago the Socialist Party's Di Rupo warned that Flemish attempts to create their own social security system would mean the

end of Belgium. Joëlle Milquet of the CD&V's Walloon sister party, the Democrat Humanist CDH, referred last year to differences in the "degree of support for the Belgian federation" between the regions. This was Leterme's biggest obstacle in finding coalition partners.

Verhofstadt's 14-strong emergency unity interim government is intended to remain in power until March 23 before handing over to Leterme. This is based on the assumption that Leterme will be able to achieve in the next three months what he has been unable to do since June. Far from resolving the crisis, Verhofstadt's interim government will only intensify the existing antagonisms.

Five parties are represented: Christian Democrats (CD&V and CDH) and Liberals (Open VLD and the francophone Reform Movement, MR) from both language groups, and the PS. Flemish and Francophone parties are represented by seven ministers each. Six months after the electorate comprehensively rejected Verhofstadt and Di Rupo, they are back at the head of the government.

Apart from Verhofstadt himself, other ministers retaining their previous posts include Interior Minister Patrick Dewael, Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, and Finance Minister Didier Reynders. Reynders is one of two deputy prime ministers, along with Leterme, who has responsibility for the budget portfolio.

With the budget, rising prices, and the deployment of troops in Lebanon, Verhofstadt is also charged with discussing constitutional changes to devolve power to the regions. He will not participate in these talks, but will nominate 12 established political figures to conduct them. He has appointed Leterme to lead them, indicating a continuation of the same policies. If these talks break down, the interim government could remain in power until the regional elections of 2009.

Without an independent socialist programme to unite Belgian workers, not just across language barriers within Belgium but across the whole of Europe in a struggle to establish the United Socialist States of Europe, there can be no progressive solution to this outbreak of nationalism and regionalism and the growth of social inequality.

In the absence of such a programme, the threat of the balkanisation of Belgium increases. Belgian commentators frequently draw comparisons with the former Yugoslavia. Jan de Troyer, head of TV Brussel, said recently, "There are 120,000-150,000 francophones living in Flanders, and there's no magic wand to make them disappear! We aren't in Yugoslavia!"

Although historically associated mainly with Flemish nationalists, francophone politicians have also now voiced separatist sentiments. Daniel Ducarme, a senior member of MR, recently told newspapers that the Belgian federation is finished. He called for the formation of a "French Belgium," combining Brussels and Wallonie. "French Belgium," he said, keeping its flag and its monarchy, should adopt an "association" with France along the lines of French Polynesian colonial territories.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, fresh from a conference on the Balkans, denied that France would encourage Walloon secession. Sarkozy insisted that the Belgian crisis had nothing in common with Kosovo. France, said Sarkozy, did not want to interfere in the problems of its great friend and neighbour.

Such an intervention would, as Sarkozy knows, mean a political crisis that would involve most of Western Europe. He is keen not to identify Belgium with the Balkans because in reality he recognises the validity of the comparison and is mindful of the number of European conflicts that have been fought on Belgian battlefields.

The impossibility of any peaceful division of the country can be

seen by looking at Brussels. The capital has long been established as an administrative centre for international organisations such as the European Union and NATO. All secessionist programmes include Brussels. Even VB lays claim to the city, which would be given special language status within their Flemish nation.

As the city has grown, francophone politicians have sought to enlarge the French-speaking regions around it, while Flemish nationalists have sought to divide the language groups. Flemish politicians voted in November to split the compromise electoral district BHV (Brussel-Halle-Vilvoorde in Dutch, Bruxelles-Hal-Vilvorde in French), denying suburban francophone voters the right to vote for French-speaking candidates.

As francophone voters moved out into the Flemish suburbs, BHV was established in 1963 to incorporate the city centre and its hinterland. In BHV, unlike elsewhere in Belgium, parties from both language groups could canvass support. November's vote, denounced as a provocation by francophone politicians, forces most of the 120,000 suburban French-speakers to vote for Flemish parties.

Many workers, Flemish and Walloon, reject separatism and the attempt to divide them into language groups. But without an independent political programme, they are being driven by the trade unions behind the bourgeois government in Brussels and a defence of the Belgian state in the name of national unity. Recent demonstrations called by the country's three main unions demanded the unity of the country, while calling for the maintenance of the national social security system. Some 20,000 people participated.

The unions explicitly counterpose national unity to class struggle. In a recent petition calling for unity they outlined their vision of society in this united Belgium: "The solidarity between the richest and poorest citizens, just as the solidarity between the richest and poorest regions, are the props of our Belgian society."

The unions are playing a vital role in propping up the Belgian ruling class by soliciting support for the interim government and politically disarming the working class. Bernard Noel of the liberal CGSLB expressed concern after the last demonstration, fearful of a "backlash against politicians." Union leaders have already been involved in discussions with Verhofstadt about the interim government. Leaders of the Christian Democratic, socialist and liberal unions have all said that the government must tackle everyday problems rather than concentrating on what the CGSLB's Jan Vercamst called dismissively "regional quarrels."

The independent interests of all Belgian workers and their unity can only be secured on the basis of a struggle to transcend *all* national divisions within the working class. The perspective that articulates this essential task is that of a United Socialist States of Europe, which offers a progressive alternative to the deepening crisis of the nation-state system and the eruption throughout much of Europe of retrogressive regional and ethnic nationalisms, whether in the Balkans, Belgium, Spain or Italy.



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