

Belgium edges closer to split as rival factions fail to agree

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Thirteen months after winning a general election, Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme has again found himself unable to maintain his unstable coalition government. Belgium is moving towards break-up.

A country which has existed for 177 years and is at the heart of Europe is about to disintegrate.

Belgium is “a country on the edge of the abyss” according to *Le Soir*. The *New York Times* ran a piece about the growing tensions within Belgium under the headline “With Flemish nationalism on the rise, Belgium teeters on the edge.” *Die Tageszeitung* described Belgium as “Europe’s most successful ‘failed’ state.”

The implications of a “failed state” hosting the headquarters of the European Union and NATO have begun to hit home. Writing in the *Financial Times* last month Tony Barber discussed the talk of a “velvet divorce” between the Flemish and French speaking parts of the country. Some suggest, he said that “the country’s break-up could be managed peacefully and without a descent into economic instability. But, at least as far as the economy is concerned, this view may be a touch too sanguine.”

He pointed to the question of the Belgian national debt, which is now running at 85 per cent of GDP. “If Belgium were to split,” Padhraic Garvey of Dutch finance company ING warned, “there would be a huge debate about who owns the debt, with associated risks for coupon and redemption payments.”

There is already a widening gap between Belgian government bonds and German government bonds. A continued failure to form a government or moves towards a split would almost certainly unsettle foreign investors, who play a major part in the economy. Ten percent of Belgian jobs depend on foreign investment.

As Europe lurches towards a recession, the prospect of a split becomes more likely, as Flemish politicians from the north reject the idea of continuing to pay the €6 billion (\$8.9 billion) that goes to the depressed industrial areas of the French-speaking south. By the same token, the possible economic damage inflicted, not just on Belgium, but on the global financial system becomes greater. Uncertainty about the payment of a national debt in time of recession is the stuff of

financial nightmares.

The latest instalment of the Belgian crisis began on July 15, when Leterme tendered his resignation to King Albert II for the third time since the election. Albert refused to accept, and appointed a three-man commission to end the deadlock.

Leterme, head of the right-wing Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), campaigned last year on extending the autonomous powers of Belgium’s main regions. In particular, there were calls to extend the regional financial autonomy of the wealthier Flemish-speaking north of the country, Flanders, which accounts for 65 percent of national GDP.

Flemish nationalists are calling for Flanders’ separation from the poorer French-speaking south of the country, Wallonie. Walloon unemployment is three times that of Flanders. Where Flemish GDP per head is 124 percent of the European Union average, in Wallonie the figure is 90 percent. Some Flemish business representatives are campaigning for division along the Czechoslovakian model. Flemish nationalists do not want to subsidise welfare provision in the south. The extreme-right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) say that this social finance has turned the Walloons into “welfare addicts.” The capital, Brussels, is also disputed. The city is French-speaking, but sits in a Flemish province.

The CD&V won the election in alliance with the moderate Flemish nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA), and Leterme was invited to form a government. The constitutional changes Leterme proposed required a two-thirds majority he did not have. The suggestion of Flemish secession made Walloon Liberals (MR) and Christian Democrats (CDH) unwilling to enter any coalition. At the same time, Flemish nationalists, including those in Leterme’s own party, were strengthened both by his proposals and by the subsequent chaos of the coalition negotiations. Nationalists increased their demands for greater autonomy. Local disputes have escalated over language regulations in some of Brussels’ southern suburbs. At stake is the attachment of the capital to one or other of the language regions.

Leterme’s tactic has been to defer the problems and pass contentious questions to a parliamentary commission. When the parliamentary commission failed to deliver, Leterme offered his resignation. Many commentators acknowledge that this

indicates that his coalition is not viable. Leterme admitted as much when he offered his resignation. Declaring, “The federal consensus model has reached its limits,” he said: “It appears that the conflicting visions of the communities over how to give a new equilibrium to our state have become incompatible.”

The king did not accept Leterme’s resignation. The constitutional monarch has played a direct role in many recent political negotiations, and he sounded out regional leaders and union officials while he considered the matter. He asked Leterme to stay on, and appointed a three-man commission to “examine in what way guarantees can be offered in order to begin in a credible way an institutional dialogue.”

There is no indication that this commission will be any more successful than Leterme has been. The “institutional dialogue” means another attempt at the regional constitutional reforms which are escalating the conflict.

Flemish nationalists are unlikely to accept any compromise on their demands. Vlaams Belang (VB) was formed after its predecessor Vlaams Blok was condemned by the Appeal Court in Ghent for repeated incitement to discrimination. The change of name has done nothing to alter its right-wing racist platform. Regional devolution and the accompanying spread of chauvinism has facilitated its becoming part of the mainstream of Flemish regional politics, and it increasingly sets the agenda for the other Flemish parties.

In the past calls for independence have come from Flemish politicians. But an increasing number of Walloon politicians are also now suggesting dividing the country. Recent opinion polls indicate that up to half of Walloons would accept a merger with France in the event of the division of Belgium. There is already talk of a “corridor” from French speaking Brussels to the south, as though the capital would be blockaded like Berlin in the Cold War.

The recent recognition of Kosovan independence by the United States and some states within the European Union has set a precedent.

The break-up of Belgium is beginning to take on a certain inevitability for the media commentators. But workers can not afford to be by-standers in this slow motion train wreck. Life has gone on as usual in Belgium throughout this year because so much power has already been devolved to the regions and what has not been devolved is largely handled by the European Union. What the federal government does control is welfare spending, which is why the conflict between the contending factions of politicians is greatest on this issue.

It is hardly likely that the French government would be willing to find funds for the unemployed workers of devastated steel towns like Charleroi if the Walloon region of Belgium opted to join France. France has enough rust-belt regions of its own. A common language does not provide a basis for common interests.

Important historical questions are raised by the possible break-up of Belgium. This was a state created for a purpose. It was a

buffer state in the area that had come to be known as the battlefield of Europe. Even before two world wars were fought across its territory, what became Belgium in 1831 was the cockpit of Europe.

We are used to thinking of the buffer states of Eastern Europe—standing between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. Their absorption into the European Union took place without military conflict, but not without massively exacerbating tensions between Russia and the US and its newfound allies. The final word on the implications of this conflict has not been said. Despite Czechoslovakia’s “velvet divorce”, there is little possibility of a “praline divorce” for Belgium. Nothing in its history or make-up immunises Belgium from the growth of the grotesque national chauvinism, racism and even the type of ethnic conflicts that were unleashed by the cultivation of separatism during the break-up of Yugoslavia. This is particularly the case at a time of worsening economic conditions, in which the bourgeois parties will have a particular interest in encouraging the most bitter national divisions.

Workers have to take an independent attitude to the process that is taking place in Belgium. They must defend their own class interests, rather than those of the self-seeking cliques of national politicians who see in further devolution and eventual independence a route to power and wealth for themselves.

Nor is it only Belgian workers who need to be concerned. The break-up of Belgium has implications for the rest of Europe, where numerous rival elites claim to represent the interests of various ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. In Spain, Italy, Scotland and France there are innumerable bourgeois and middle-class politicians who have ambitions to make themselves the leaders of mini-statelets with a direct line to EU funds and global investors. A break-up of Belgium would put wind in all their sails and lead to more secessions from long established states. In every case national separatism fomenters racism and chauvinism and divides workers.

The Balkanisation of Europe into ever smaller rival states can offer no prospect of either peace or stability and must be rejected. But the imminent break-up of a country such as Belgium should be taken as a warning that not even a long established nation state can offer a secure future for working people. The working class is by nature an international class and its interests lie in overthrowing the capitalist system and creating a United Socialist States of Europe. Only such a formation, placing economic and social life under the democratic control of the working class, can provide the basis for the harmonious development and utilisation of Europe’s massive resources for the benefit of all.



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