

# THE CRISIS OF BELGIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

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## 1. *The Character of the Belgian Socialist Party*

THE year 1965 will undoubtedly be counted among the most disastrous in the long history of Belgian Social Democracy. It brought to the Belgian Socialist Party an unprecedented electoral defeat (the magnitude of which we will discuss later); and it was a defeat that occurred on the chosen ground of Social-Democracy. For an electoral disaster, unlike an unsuccessful strike, represents complete political *limbo*, since the electoral returns constitute the beginning and the end of orthodox social-democratic philosophy.

In addition to electoral defeat, there is another cause of profound bitterness for the Belgian Socialist Party. Solidly entrenched in an organization which the Communist Party has never seriously been able to undermine, it has seen its unity disrupted in the course of this same year. From its foundation (in 1885), the Belgian Socialist Party developed within its reformism an opposition that was often energetic and clear-sighted, but which was always a prisoner of the myth of unity. Now, on the Left, new groups have appeared which have broken away from the party apparatus. It is too early to say whether these secessions have succeeded. We shall see that the conditions under which they developed were extremely difficult and those who split off could certainly not count upon a rapid success. Nevertheless, as a result of the split, the crisis of Belgian Social-Democracy has been further aggravated. It runs the risk of no longer being able to keep within the framework of its organization, in some sense as hostages, a core of genuine Socialists. The co-existence of bureaucrats and rebels, of allies some of whom accepted neo-capitalism and others who were violent opponents of it, was for the leaders of the Socialist Party a cause of constant anxiety. But it did allow the leaders, in the last resort, to control their own opposition within an organizational framework and in a political atmosphere which favoured their own plans. It is for this reason that the secession movements of the year 1965, despite their modest beginnings, add still further to the confusion of Social-Democracy and illustrate its creeping paralysis.

This paralysis, the existence of which it is today difficult even for the most sympathetic observers to deny, is not the result of a sudden collapse. It is rather the result of a long evolution. It has been inherent

in the nature of the Socialist Party for some time. The left-wing of the party—and this phenomenon is certainly not peculiar to Belgium—always affirmed its confidence in the possibilities of a genuine revitalization of the party. For a long time the miraculous formula consisted more of a series of irrational nostalgic reflexes than of a policy based on insight and imagination. It amounted to advocating a return to the past, to "true Socialism", to "the true traditions of the party" of which the Left claimed to embody the authentic spirit. If every group needs a mythology to reinforce its cohesion, the Socialist Left found its unity in the invocation of a revolutionary past. Thus in their daily struggle against the party bosses and the "realists", the rebels called as witnesses their great predecessors, and created for themselves a purely imaginary revolutionary genealogy.

Politically, this mystification in which the Left indulged corresponded to needs that were genuine and real. The Left found it necessary to claim that the battle within the party was justified by the *abnormal* character of the *current* leadership. To manufacture a mythical past was to open the possibilities of a promising future; since if the party of former days was as pure and as revolutionary as one liked to imagine, nothing could really prevent it from regaining this state of grace. But the argument was also turned against the Left. Time and again, it was taunted for its impotent sterility and its unruly temperament: "You are always dissatisfied. Tell us, who is *the man*, who are the leaders, which is the party that will satisfy you?" The Left would reply: "Here is the party! It is your own party, our party before opportunism had infected it. This is the party we wish to recreate." The party of "the good old days".

As far as the Belgian Socialist Left is concerned, this distortion of the truth, this caricature, was encouraged by certain historical facts. Down to 1914, the Belgian Labour Party, the direct ancestor of the modern Socialist Party, had found itself not only in opposition to the successive governments which ruled the country, but also, it seemed, to the capitalist system itself. This was the period when Rosa Luxembourg asked the European working classes to "speak Belgian". Of all the countries in Europe, Belgium seemed to present the almost perfect case of a brutal class war situation, without mercy and without any possible mediation, where a ruling class conservative to the point of blindness faced a proletariat radical to the point of heroism. Karl Kautsky also affirmed that the Belgian working class was the furthest advanced along the road to the revolution. His error was excusable. Between 1893 and 1913, Belgium had experienced three general strikes of a political nature. It is true that they had as their aim a demand which did not threaten the survival of capitalism, namely universal suffrage. But they were carried on with such impetuosity, and they called forth such reserves of energy, self-sacrifice and discipline on the part of a proletariat whose political organiza-

tion was barely in existence, that it came to be asked if this country which Marx called "the paradise of capitalism" would not be the first to bury it.

Within the European Socialist movement the prestige of the Belgian Labour Party was at its zenith. Not everyone drew a distinction between the workers on strike and in revolt, on the one hand, and their political organization on the other. A realistic examination of the facts shows beyond all possible doubt that the leadership of the party never organized the movement except under pressure from below; that it sought to delay any outbreak as long as possible; to limit its progress within a strict and narrow legality; and finally to stop it as soon as circumstances permitted, and while it was still far from having exhausted its impetus or attained its objectives. If the revolutionary Marxists of the time invited the proletariat of Europe to become inspired by the Belgian example, this example was also something to inspire in a different way Social-Democratic bureaucracies haunted by the frightful prospect of popular uprisings.

Also, if it is true that the Belgian Labour Party remained in opposition and did not participate in bourgeois governments—observing in this matter the instructions of the Second International—it was primarily because no opportunity ever presented itself for the party to give way to the temptations of power. The Catholic Party was able to keep its absolute majority, despite a *rapprochement* between Socialists and Liberals which ignored all doctrinal differences. The ease with which the representatives of the party agreed to join the Government at the outbreak of World War I shows clearly enough that even as early as this supposedly heroic period opportunism was rife within Belgian Social-Democracy.

The Belgian Socialists, after their first experience of government, now acquired a taste for it; and it has been calculated that between 1918 and May 1965, they have held ministerial office for some 60 per cent of the whole period. The type of electoral system in operation in Belgium (characterized by a fairly strict proportional representation), as well as the division of the working class along religious lines, prevented the Belgian Labour Party and its successor, the Belgian Socialist Party (P.S.B.) from gaining or even approaching an absolute majority. A coalition formula has been applied almost continuously in Belgium since the introduction in 1919 of universal suffrage, and the Socialists, in order to gain a share of power, allied themselves sometimes to the Catholics, sometimes to the Liberals. In the first phase of their participation in government, they still believed it necessary to justify their position, but this was easily done in terms which paid only lip service to their doctrinal principles. It was at times a matter of supporting national defence, at others of assisting the reconstruction of the country. On some occasions, it was necessary to defend the franc and at others to help overcome the economic

crisis revealed by a high level of unemployment or the political crisis brought about by the rise of fascism.

This need for justification, however, has long since passed. Certainly from the end of the Second World War, the Socialist Party has had a permanent vocation for power. It no longer chooses either participation or opposition, because its choice is already made in advance. Even the supposedly regenerative virtues of what is known as "the healing powers of opposition" exert no attraction for its leadership. Every official of the party now has a ministerial portfolio in his knapsack. And although ministerial positions in fact are few, there are many other consolations that are equally appreciated. It needs to be emphasized that the Belgian state machine is political to an extraordinary degree. Access to public posts whether of senior, middle-rank and low grade, or to the teaching profession, requires almost always membership of a political party. Some branches of the Administration (Justice for example) belong traditionally to the bourgeois parties, others (the Ministry of Labour and its many departments) are mainly open to civil servants who are known to be Socialists and officially supported by the party. In Belgium, where the low level of political awareness does not prevent a high degree of "politicalization" of public life, the Administration of the state is multi-party. Capitalism leaves its routine administration to civil servants who, whatever their political affiliation, work within the framework of the system which none of them now calls in question.

A picture of the Belgian Socialist Party would be incomplete without mentioning another aspect of its work. The party does not simply take a share in the administration of society as a whole; it is also concerned in the management of its own institutions. It is not enough to say that there is in Belgium a "Socialist Party" which has some hundreds of thousands of members. The country has rather a Socialist world in which the party organization occupies no more than one sector. This "world" is a whole complex of institutions comprising trade unions, friendly societies, co-operatives, cultural associations, and organizations of young people. In this complex, the friendly societies occupy a privileged position by virtue of their financial importance. Having control of considerable resources, they constitute the infra-structure of the Socialist movement and provide it to a considerable extent with its general outlook, encompassing the movement within their own material preoccupations and commercial mentality. It must further be noted that the political personnel—and notably the parliamentary wing—of Belgian Socialism is closely linked with the management of this network of institutions. The bureaucracy which governs this network, to a greater extent than either trade unions or political organizations as such, is the source of recruitment for an important part of the managerial and middle level personnel of the Belgian Socialist Party. The Belgian Socialist Party in a way forms

its own society on the fringe of bourgeois society: and there also exists, in the same sense, a Catholic society or rather a Catholic world, and to a lesser extent a Liberal world. In no way is this Socialist world a rival to the party, both being infused with the same spirit, and fulfilling so to speak the functions assigned to them by the bourgeois regime, though not, of course, without internal strains and conflicts.

## 2. *The Decline of Belgian Social-Democracy*

Reformism is not, in the Socialist Party, either an accident or the product of a belated degeneracy. On the contrary it has always marked, even determined, its character. It would take us too far to enter here into the debate concerning reform and revolution and to discuss how these two terms, always presented as opposites, are far from being necessarily incompatible. But if the party of the revolution can legitimately claim to fight also for reform, the reformist parties must by their nature limit themselves solely to this type of action. Since the dialectic of reform can lead to revolutionary situations, the presence of a radical current within reformist parties is justified. On the other hand, the struggle for reforms was sufficient to turn Social-Democracy into an anti-capitalist force at a time when capitalism refused to grant certain of the demands made by the workers. From the moment when the dominant capitalist forces began, for example, to accept universal suffrage, or even a certain type of decolonization, or, on the economic plane, certain forms of nationalization and planning, the fundamental nature of Social-Democracy came to be transformed. On the one hand, its reformism ceased to be a genuine element of conflict, and even tended to become a part of the bourgeois regime; and, on the other, the distinction between reformist Social-Democracy and the bourgeois democratic parties diminished, since the latter, too, demanded changes and pressed for modifications which the ruling groups no longer completely opposed.

This is why one can no longer today speak of a social-democratic reformism in the same way as in the past. One can, at most, speak of neo-reformism. One can go further and maintain that Social-Democracy has ceased to be reformist. This amounts to saying that **Social-Democracy** has disappeared. It no longer exists, and the vacuum left by its disappearance opens new possibilities for socialism, while at the same time requiring the development of a new strategy and the search for new means of action.

The break-up of Belgian Social-Democracy has been illustrated since the end of the Second World War by a series of genuine reverses concealed for a long time by illusory victories. From the Liberation in 1945, the Socialists have demonstrated their spirit of narrow opportunism and their extreme short sightedness. Nevertheless, at the time of their first post-war Congress, they proclaimed that "the time has

come to pose the question of social transformation". The programme which they then endorsed declared that "from this time the party must subordinate all its policies to the transcendent needs of this transformation". It was also stated that "the party is less and less interested in so-called national union government, which leads only to timid, indecisive solutions based on conservatism. It is less and less happy to see its representatives seated alongside representatives of conservative and capitalist groups".

Yet, the battle which followed was not in any sense one for the transformation of society, and governments, involving Socialists, which were then formed, always included some representatives of the conservative groups and some representatives of capitalist interests. The battle was one for the economic reconstruction of a country which had suffered less from the war than most of its neighbours; and the processes of reconstruction left the structure of capitalism quite intact. The nationalization experiments conducted by the Labour Party in England, and in France by the Socialists and Communists in association with the Christian Democrats under the banner of de Gaulle, were undoubtedly reforms corresponding more to the demands of neo-capitalism than to a seriously progressive strategy. But compared with the passiveness, timidity, and moderation shown by the Belgian Socialists after the war, the French and English nationalization measures appear almost as revolutionary conquests. The Belgian Labour movement (and the Communists then building up their strength were not, in this context, without their share of responsibilities) did not know how to profit either from the national situation, or from international developments, in order to wrest the slightest fundamental concession from capitalism.

Politically, when the struggle began over the question of whether King Leopold III should or should not re-occupy the throne, the Socialist Party made every effort to avoid any discussion of the problem of the monarchy. The confrontation between conservative and anti-Leopoldist forces, culminating in a quasi-revolutionary situation with a general strike and bloody skirmishes in the streets only inspired the leadership of Belgian Social-Democracy with one aim: to end the affair as soon as possible, by preserving traditional institutions, and with the aim of reintegrating the masses within their own ranks. Emphasizing their monarchial sentiments, they rallied behind the successor of Leopold III. Yet, they had only a little earlier reaffirmed their fidelity to the fifty-year-old charter of the Party, which proclaimed the Party's republican sentiments.

To the purely pragmatic exercise of ministerial power, there has been in recent years only one exception. Between 1954 and 1958, the Belgian Socialist Party made a final attempt to resolve the traditional antagonism which exists in Belgium between Socialist workers and Christian workers. This attempt took the form of an anti-clerical

offensive which sought to detach the Catholic workers from the Christian Socialist Party which has always represented them, and which is the direct successor to the old Catholic party. The methods used followed the normal rules of bourgeois and freemason orthodoxy—a campaign against religious education—and by these means it was hoped that the support for clericalism would be undermined. The portals of the Belgian Socialist Party would then be open wide and through this welcoming gate would rush the no longer mystified masses of Christian workers.

The result in no way fulfilled the predictions of the strategists of Social-Democracy: the cohesion of the Catholics was reinforced by this joint attack of Socialists and Liberals,<sup>1</sup> and the Christian workers rallied solidly around the threatened Church. At the same time as this anti-clerical programme was being developed, the Socialists, who then led a coalition government in association with the Liberals, carried on a policy of social conservatism which provoked amused sarcasm from the Right and the powerless indignation of the Left. An electoral defeat, attributed to the ingratitude of the nation, then put an end to this lamentable experiment.

Meanwhile, the economic situation had seriously deteriorated. According to the statistics of the Organization for European Economic Co-operation, the annual average increase of Belgian industrial production after 1953 no longer exceeded 3 per cent while in neighbouring countries it was often twice as great. After the Korean war boom, Belgium was for the first time faced with the brutal facts of her economic retardation. The easy conditions of the immediate post-war years, during which the governments in power—notably those including Socialists—had pursued a mainly liberal economic policy, had for a long time concealed the real economic position. In addition, the beginning of European unification—starting with the Coal and Steel Community—revealed in a dramatic way the weaknesses of the Belgian economy.

The crisis first affected the coal mines in the south of the country and associated industrial sectors. The whole Borinage region—which was once part of the most industrialized zone in western Europe—experienced a decline which no one seems to have foreseen and against which no one had taken any countervailing measures. Today the Borinage is a permanently distressed region.<sup>2</sup> The same decline has affected other areas, mostly in the Walloon part of the country. Thus there exists side by side in Belgium areas where technical progress and prosperity march in step, and others, even more numerous, which capitalism abandons first to stagnation, and later to absolute decline.

It is above all important to note that most of the efforts made to remedy this worsening economic situation have originated outside the Socialist organizations. These efforts have, of course, never questioned the foundations of the regime. In most respects, their aim has

been to bring Belgium from the stage of liberal anarchic capitalism to that of neo-capitalism. The attempt was made at one time to rationalize the coal sector by the creation of a hybrid organization which had no real power: the Socialist Party in the meantime had stopped arguing the case for the nationalization of the whole power sector. The most flagrant inadequacies of the liberal economy in general, and of the investment programmes in particular, were concealed by the establishment of a bureau of economic planning which was intended to provide the first outline of a neo-capitalist type of planning. On every occasion, the initiative came from technocratic circles. The Socialist Party contented itself with trying to persuade the most militant of its supporters that innovations of this type, in the practical application of which it was itself involved, constituted the first step in the policy of structural reforms demanded by the Left.

In addition, when the turn of events far more than the considered aims of the political leaders, made possible the achievement of social reforms which the workers themselves wanted, the leaders of the Socialist Party refused to press for them. The most typical case, in this respect, was the tragi-comic episode of the doctors' strike in Belgium. The doctors' opposition to a legislative measure advocated by the Government was *intransigent*, although what was being proposed was in fact only a timid step along the road leading to the establishment of a national health service.<sup>3</sup> But the blackmail tactics and the violently reactionary attitude of the doctors created a situation in which a realistic struggle for the farther extension of the measures proposed could have been undertaken. To have achieved this, a dynamism would have been necessary which the Socialist Party has been lacking for a long time. It would also have been necessary to rely upon the masses who were certainly ready for action and who could have been easily mobilized. But it is just this kind of development which Social-Democracy, or rather its successors, finds more and more difficult to initiate. In the event, the coalition government, which included Socialists, capitulated to the doctors and its quite timid proposals were emptied of the greater part of their original content. The Government, moreover, refused to use against the doctors on strike a new type of legal weapon which was now at its disposal, namely a new anti-trade union law. Naturally, this law was intended to be used against what one might call "traditional" strikers, that is, the working class, and it was certainly not aimed at middle class dissenters such as the doctors; nor, as already mentioned, was it in fact used against them. The initiative for this anti-trade union law came from conservative circles, with the leadership of the socialist Party lending its usual complacent support.

Finally, an examination of the socio-economic reforms achieved in Belgium during recent years shows that none of them was brought about as the result of a firm decision by the Socialist Party, and none



was caused by its actions. But this is the basic contradiction which stifles the orthodox Socialist parties at the present time. Since they are incapable of escaping from the framework of compromises compatible with the system—and it is the controlling bourgeois forces which are the judges of this compatibility—they have to restrict themselves to conformist actions and to the most timid demands, while in all these matters the non-Socialist parties are successful competitors. After all, the most respected trade union official can never be as politically satisfactory for those in power, and is often likely to be less efficient, than the technocrat directly at the service of the bourgeoisie.

### 3. *The End of Social-Democratic Reformism*

This political faintheartedness, which has now developed into an incurable anemia, would have been sufficient to produce stagnation and decline within the active forces of any party. And this is what has happened to the Belgian Socialist Party. Its leadership and secretariat keep to themselves statistical information which would throw a good deal more light on the present situation of the party, but what is known is sufficiently suggestive. The search for place and power is the dynamic drive behind the policies of many local sections. What constitutes the numerical strength of some of them is principally, sometimes exclusively, the existence of a local authority which controls admissions to public appointments. As a result the decisive influence in such sections is the block vote of members whose affiliation to the party is simply the price paid for their appointment, and for their promotion, in the public services. This is notably the case in the Brussels area for all the communes headed by Socialist mayors. **As** an additional support of bureaucratic conservatism, there is within each of these groups an abnormally high number of pensioners, of whom the vast majority have no longer any interest in politics save the hope of some trivial material advantage from the man to whom their unconditional allegiance is given.<sup>4</sup> This explains the high age level among the officers of the party, as well as the general resistance to change which the leadership can mobilize to reinforce its authority each time it feels threatened, either locally, regionally or nationally.

The decline of the Socialist Party has progressed in recent years at a rate which even its most severe critics would not have expected. In neo-capitalist society, an opposition Socialist Party can only hope to take full advantage of all the contradictions, weaknesses and failures that arise by taking forward the struggle for socialism. But there is no future for a party which pretends to be socialist if, each time that a crisis occurs, it employs all its energies to resolve it in the interest of the *status quo*. This is precisely what the Socialist Party has done in all circumstances, and not least in those situations in which the crisis of traditional society was particularly marked.

The obvious example is the great strike which paralysed Belgium

during December 1960 to January 1961.<sup>8</sup> The strike was brought about by a series of Government measures imposed by a Conservative Cabinet (a Catholic-Liberal coalition) some of which—notably those concerning pensions and taxation—were wholly contrary to the interests of the working class. The Socialist Party was not in the Government and decided to obtain the greatest possible advantage from opposition to this unpopular legislation. It used its vast propaganda machine to denounce the Government's plans and thereby helped to spread discontent, and to increase the workers' will to resist. The trade union organizations carried out a similar policy. Less embarrassed by petty political considerations (the leadership of the Socialist Party was already thinking of a future coalition government with the Christian Democrats), and in more direct contact with the workers, the unions went a good deal further in stiffening their willingness to fight. On 16 December 1960, the enlarged national committee of the Belgian General Federation of Labour (that is, all the unions allied to the Socialist Party) passed a moderate resolution in favour of a national day of struggle organized against the Government's proposals. The motion obtained 496,487 votes against 475,893 for a minority amendment presented by **André Renard**, the leader of the left-wing. This amendment demanded the organization of a general strike but only after a fairly long period of preparation. Parliament, however, was on the point of opening the debate on the proposals. This is no doubt why, without instructions from above and against the will of the union leaders, and sometimes also against their allegedly radical leaders, tens of thousands of workers came out on strike on 20 December.

We shall not attempt to describe here the history of the strike. It was a remarkable example of a spontaneous movement that brought together, without any real organization, perhaps nearly a million strikers (out of a working population of about 3,500,000). The national leadership of the unions at no time agreed to call a general strike. As for the Socialist Party, its delicate position arose from the fact that, while it had denounced the undesirable character of the government's measures, and had to give "moral" support to a movement which sought to bring about their withdrawal, it nevertheless did not favour such vigorous action, and feared above all a venture into the unknown. The strike itself was certainly a venture into the unknown, as were the demonstrations in the streets which were generally peaceful, but on occasion riotous and sometimes bloody (four strikers and demonstrators were killed). The strike inevitably involved repression and violence. It also involved a constant pressure exerted by the masses upon the socialist leaders to give the strike more positive support. All this was quite contrary to the philosophy of the orthodox leadership and also to its plans for a future political collaboration with the Christian Democrats. Even so, these leaders found them-

selves under the disagreeable necessity of having to applaud and at least verbally to support an action which they privately condemned. And not only privately, for in the middle of the strike and its repression (when people had already been killed and hundreds of strikers were in prison), one of the principal leaders of the Socialist Party, the former Prime Minister, Van Acker, declared in open Parliament to the then Prime Minister: "I understand very well that the Government is doing what is necessary to maintain order. I would have done the same myself". And this statement was followed by a barely concealed suggestion that a negotiated settlement must be found. Yet at the same time, the strikers were increasing their appeals to the Socialist group in Parliament to adopt an attitude of genuine solidarity with the strike movement.

The strike lasted five weeks. It ultimately failed because of the absence of organized support for it, and also because there were no long-term political objectives which could give a central purpose to the strike movement. It proved the extraordinary fighting spirit of a very large section of the Belgian working class,<sup>9</sup> but it also showed up the nature of the party which claimed to be their political representative.

During the strike, when the leading figure was **André Renard**, two demands came to focus the grievances of a great number of strikers, once they had passed the purely negative stage of simply opposing the Government's projected legislation. These were the demands for "structural reforms" and for federalism.

The demand for anti-capitalistic structural reforms has become for some years the central policy of the trade unions and political left-wing in Belgium. It arose from the conviction that the social advances of the post-war period had in no way affected the fundamental power of the capitalist class and there was also growing dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of traditional demands over wages and conditions. It was in 1954 that a team of left-wing unionists, grouped around **André Renard**, persuaded the Belgian General Federation of Labour to adopt a programme of structural reforms. Though not revolutionary, this programme was nevertheless clearly distinct from the shortsighted pragmatic approach typical of the conservative union leadership. It demanded, in addition to flexible planning, a series of nationalization measures among which the first was fuel and power. There was also to be a control of share-holdings—a detailed analysis having made plain the extraordinary concentration of economic power in the hands of very large share-holders. As it stood, the programme had grave deficiencies and limitations; but at least it had the merit of trying to extricate the Belgian Labour and trade union movement from the groove in which it was stuck, by enlarging its field of action and its usual terms of reference.

A little later, the same group which had formulated the programme of structural reform established a weekly periodical, *La Gauche*. This

journal rapidly brought together all those within the Socialist Party who wished to fight against the dominant conservative leadership. La *Gauche* contributed notably both to the more precise definition of these structural reforms and to their acceptance within the movement. The action of the Left seemed crowned with success when, at the end of 1959, the Socialist Party accepted the same programme in its official platform and as a basis for its demands. The party decided to organize a propaganda campaign to popularize the idea of structural reforms, but having taken this "audacious" decision all the energy of which the old Social-Democratic machine was capable seemed to have been exhausted. Nothing was done in practice to educate the activists of the party or to bring them together in a struggle to obtain the demands that had been adopted. The idea of structural reforms was finally taken up once again by those participating in the great strike in their search for slogans of a more fundamental kind than pure wage demands.

Thus, in the political and social field, the Socialist Party has in recent years entirely neglected the chances which it had of taking advantage of the weaknesses and contradictions of the régime, and in particular of its need for renovation and structural modification. The party failed, that is to say, to demonstrate its usefulness even on the level of simple reformism. A similar situation was also created in the field of the country's political structure, where again the orthodox Socialists have been equally incapable of developing a policy that was not wholly conservative.

Belgium is a country with a unitary constitution, despite the fact that her population is composed of two clearly **differentiated** communities. It is only fairly recently that a really deep division of the country has come about and this has added a new dimension to the series of unresolved problems in which its leaders are enmeshed. This additional source of political and social friction is generally referred to as the linguistic problem, but it involves far more than a question of language. The Flemish and Walloon communities are, in fact, different from one another on many grounds. Not only are the languages spoken by the two groups different (Dutch, allowing for some variants, by the Flemings, French by the Walloons) but their cultural and social characteristics are also **distinct**.<sup>7</sup> The Flemings who mostly live in the north of Belgium only experienced industrialization very late, while the Walloon region was for the most part one of the earliest areas of European industrialization in the nineteenth century. This single fact accounts for much else. The Flemings have remained for a long time within an agrarian economy and, on the religious **and** political plane, have been dominated by the authority of the Catholic Church. The Walloons, assisted by industrialization and French influences, are largely emancipated from the tutelage, at least politically, of Catholicism. Especially in the industrial regions and in the towns where the great majority of the Walloon population is concentrated,

a secular philosophy has been widespread, coloured politically first by Liberalism, and then by Socialism. Roughly speaking, one may say that Flanders is right-wing and the Walloon region **left-wing**.<sup>8</sup> To give only one example, in the plebiscite organized in 1959 on the question of the desirability of the return of Leopold III to the throne, 72 per cent of the Flemings were in favour of his return, while 58 per cent of the Walloons declared against it.

Having said this, it must be recognized that for a long time the Flemings occupied an inferior social position in Belgium and were the victims of a harsh cultural oppression. Belgium was politically and economically controlled by a bourgeoisie which, whatever its geographical location, was almost exclusively French-speaking, and showed a double contempt both for the Flemings as a people and for their language. The reaction against this situation inevitably took the form of a Flemish national movement which was recruited largely from among the lower middle class, whose intellectual (more precisely literary) and romantic attitudes reflected the typical nationalism of the nineteenth century. The Flemish Socialist movement held aloof from this nationalism and consistently ignored its social content. Flemish nationalism thus developed outside the working class and sometimes against Socialism. At the time of the rise of Fascism, some parts of the movement came under the influence of this ideology, and during the Second World War, as indeed during the First, there was a strong tendency towards collaboration with the occupying forces. No form of Belgian patriotism had fortified it against such compromises. Democratic evolution and especially the introduction (in 1919) of universal suffrage resulted in the almost complete disappearance of the nineteenth-century type of oppression, although there still exist forms of social pressure which operate against the Flemish people and which continue to encourage Flemish demands, and in particular the aim of autonomy.

The Walloon autonomist movement, by contrast, is of more recent origin. Completely marginal in character until the end of the Second World War, it affected only a small group of intellectuals, who were more often frank supporters of the attachment of the Walloon regions to France rather than of the federalization of Belgium. The political disturbances after the war were the first encouragement for Walloon nationalism, and it was the question of the monarchy which contributed greatly to the exacerbation of relationships between the two communities. The first separate congress of Walloon Socialists took place in 1947.

But the real Walloon awakening, reaching beyond the very narrow intellectual circles in which it first appeared, is an even more recent phenomenon. It is the result of the post-war economic and social evolution of Belgium, and in particular of what the Walloons describe as their minorization, that is to say, the diminishing place which they

occupy in the total population, as well as in the general economy of Belgium. This has come about because of the growing obsolescence of much of the country's industrial equipment and this affects above all the traditionally industrialized zone of the Walloon regions. At the same time Flanders has been experiencing a considerable industrial development and this newly established industry naturally tends to be based upon the latest technology.

Finally, the radical political current within the trade unions as well as among the left-wing opposition within the Socialist Party recruits its strength almost exclusively in the Walloon districts? The Christian trade unions have their main stronghold in Flanders and the Socialist unions in the Walloon districts. The struggle over Leopold III was the first confrontation between the Walloon left and the Flemish right. The great strike of 1960-1 constituted in some respects a repetition of this. But because the historical context was quite different at the time of the strike, there were also different and in some matters more durable consequences. By 1961 public opinion had begun to be impressed with the political weight of the Flemings as well as by their demographic superiority, and on the other hand the economic decline of the Walloon areas, notably the Borinage, was already under way. By contrast, in the earlier period (1945-50), the economy of the country, especially in the Walloon areas, had been experiencing the apparent benefits of the "Belgian miracle" prolonged by the Korean war boom, while the economic development of Flanders still lay, for the most part, in the future.

The strikers of 1960-1 and their leaders undoubtedly had a feeling that they had been betrayed by the Flemings. What in fact happened was that they had been left to their own devices by a national union leadership of which the Flemish elements were only the most conservative wing. But in the last stages of the strike, as a result, Walloon sentiments became more and more pronounced and **André Renard**, who was looking for new and more useful slogans which would give a purpose to the movement, took note of this new trend. Barely a month after the end of the strike, it was decided to create the Walloon Popular Movement of which **Renard** was president until his death in 1962. Since then, this mass organization, which we discuss later, has developed on a very broad front the Walloon federalist demand (to which is also added the demand for structural reforms).

It is in this way that the question of the political structure of the Belgian state has been for many years now in the forefront of political battles and preoccupations. Broadly speaking, the forces opposing one another can be classified as follows: the Left (minority opposition in the Socialist Party, some Christian groups, Communists, radical Walloon trade unionists, Flemish Social-Democrats) has taken a position in favour of federalism; the right (Liberals, Catholics and the orthodox Socialist leaders) are unconditionally opposed to it. The

support of the Left for federalist solutions has not always been enthusiastic and the sometimes narrow-minded elements among the nationalists share these reservations. But three considerations ultimately led the Left to support federalism: firstly, the prospect of liberating the more advanced elements of Belgian Socialism, concentrated in the Walloon areas, from the pressure of the moderate and conservative elements of the labour movement, which are especially strong in the Flemish areas; secondly, the belief that, for practical reasons, the struggle for federalism and for structural reforms has become one, and that an important part of the Walloon working class—especially its militant *avant-garde*, mainly concentrated in Libge—is now so committed to federalism that it would be wrong and dangerous not to take it into account. Lastly, a final reason which derives more from principles than from tactics: the conviction that the existence of two distinct national communities in Belgium makes federalism a democratic objective of which socialists cannot disapprove.

But if the Socialist Left vigorously supports the adoption of federalism in Belgium, the Social-Democratic leadership opposes it with a resolution which earns it the admiration of bourgeois circles. And we have here a further aspect of policy in which the Socialist Party exhibits a conservatism which separates it from all the dynamic forces in the country. Both in the Walloon regions and to an even greater extent in Flanders, there is a vigorous opposition to the continued existence of a unitary constitution; and of the continued growth of this opposition there is now no possible doubt.

It should be added that, in relation to foreign and colonial policy, the Belgian Socialist Party has always shown impeccable bourgeois orthodoxy. Ever since the end of the war, it has always been wholly pro-American, a policy whose incarnation is Paul Henry **Spaak**, who, save for a term of duty as General Secretary of N.A.T.O. has been in almost continuous charge of Belgian foreign policy since **1940**.

As for colonial affairs, the Socialist Party showed little interest in the Congo until recent years and appeared content to leave its fate in the hands of conservative administrations, the Catholic Church and capitalist interests. The party happened to be in opposition during the period **1959-60**, and was able to escape immediate responsibility for Belgian policies in that crucial period. From July **1960** onwards, however, it fully supported military intervention in the Congo and Socialist leaders have ever since been closely involved in the attempts to maintain "Western" control in the country.

#### 4. *The Disruption of Socialist Unity*

It remains to be considered how this general policy of the Socialist Party led to a secession by the left-wing, which thereby destroyed a unity which had hitherto been regarded as sacrosanct.

One of the main reasons for the continued unity of the party was the belief that there was no national alternative to the organization of the Socialist Party, given that membership of the Communist Party was rejected. This paralysing conviction has gradually lost its force in recent years. During the period of coalition government, the discontent it aroused came to be focused around the demands of the Walloons discussed above. The confusion between a fairly primitive nationalist instinct and an acceptance of the class struggle may be regretted, but its existence must be recognized. It must be emphasised that the working classes have shown themselves more susceptible to attempts to involve them in a national feeling or sentiment than in a straight conflict on a class basis. Certainly there is no organization or any significance which attempts the latter; however, this failure is in no way peculiar to Belgium but is a more general phenomenon which underlines the crisis of the European Left.

So far as the struggle for federalism is concerned, it was carried through in the Walloon region by the organization that emerged from the strike of 1960—the *Mouvement Populaire Wallon*. The strength of this organization, which initially grew rapidly, was derived in the first instance from the discontent and disillusionment of the trade unions and the left-wing Socialists. It was they above all who created the Movement, who formulated its policy and carried out its **propaganda**, and it was in it that the ideas of "structural reform" were given a prominent place. The M.P.W. did not seek to establish itself as a political party. According to its leaders, its ambition was to develop as a pressure group, seeking to push the Socialist Party towards more radical class actions as well as towards an acceptance of the federal idea. Experience has proved the inadequacy of this policy. The only lasting result of the M.P.W.'s activity has been a continued worsening of relations with the Socialist leadership and eventually an open break with it.

For the first time for many years, the discontent which the conservative policy of the Socialist Party had for so long fostered among the workers, now found a focus around a political organization, the M.P.W. The Communist Party, by contrast, had profited little from the general discredit of Social-Democracy. In the Walloon region, there was for a time, a genuine revival of militant spirit around the new organization. It soon achieved a membership of several tens of thousands, and quickly became a serious threat to the Socialist Party. All this took place, however, against a national background of declining political interest in Socialism and of a steady loss of working class strength, and the M.P.W. was unable to arrest these general trends.

It is naturally difficult to state precisely when the weakening of the forces of the Left began. Until the spring of 1963, it is reasonable to argue that the Left was growing in strength. The opposition Left within the Socialist Party was attracting increasing support and was



causing serious difficulties to the leadership of the party. Especially was this so when the latter accepted the coalition government's proposals (in which the Socialist Party was represented) for limiting the right to strike; and the Left was able to weaken considerably the original proposals. When the amended proposals came before an extraordinary Congress of the Socialist Party, the Left was able to win 30 per cent of the votes for their rejection. And in Parliament, when the same proposals were debated, twelve Socialist deputies (out of eighty-four) refused to vote for them. Never had the opposition of the Left seemed so firm or so strong.

When however, some eighteen months later, the relations of the Left with the leadership of the party reached breaking point, the situation was by no means so favourable. The activity of the Walloon Movement had declined a good deal; and it had lost its dynamism in every aspect of its work except that which was connected with the struggle for federalism. The doctors' strike, for instance, to which we have referred above, and which occurred in April 1964, illustrated dramatically the weaknesses of the Left. It proved incapable of mobilizing opposition to the reactionary forces supporting the doctors, and it provided no overall strategy whereby the capitulation of the Christian-Democrat and Socialist coalition government before the doctors' intransigence could be prevented. In particular the M.P.W. showed the loss of class feeling within its own ranks by taking no firm position on the issue of the strike.

Political tactics are often guided, not by events currently important, but by the experience of the past, although in the meantime new situations have arisen. Thus the Left of the Socialist Party—and especially the weekly *La Gauche*—were encouraged by their successes, and drew further and further away from the leadership of the party. In this they were under considerable pressures from a part of their own movement. The establishment of the M.P.W., the quite spectacular progress of the left minority within the party, and what appeared to be the growing discontent of the workers, all seemed to offer new possibilities of conflict and struggle. The old taboos and the old myths that had seemed for so long to be immutable, at last seemed to be disappearing. In particular, the old idea of the Socialist Party as a party which really could be transformed through class struggle was now no longer acceptable. No political alternative as yet existed, but the need for one was beginning to be appreciated. The problem was an immensely difficult one: it involved a close analysis of events and of developing initiatives which would allow some control over future developments. In October 1964, the municipal elections made it possible to measure both the weakening of the Socialist Party and the estrangement of the left-wing. The election results were deplorable. The Left, for the first time, did not recommend its supporters to vote for the Socialist party and this meant that even the left-wing candidates in

the Socialist lists were not supported. This was the line that *La Gauche* followed throughout the campaign. The M.P.W., too, pursued a course during the election which the Socialist leaders considered extremely harmful to their interests.

Immediately after the election, a new phase of the struggle began between the controlling bureaucracy and the left wing. Sanctions were first imposed against those who had been guilty of breaches of discipline during the elections; and among those attacked was Jacques Yerna, the most prominent leader of militant trade unionism in the Liège district and managing editor of *La Gauche*. This, however, was only the beginning. At the end of November 1964, it was announced that the Socialist Party was to convene a national Congress. Its purpose was to consider the position of the editors of *La Gauche* and of its Flemish language counterpart, *Links*, and that of the leaders of the M.P.W., and whether their continued membership of the Socialist Party was compatible with the political attitudes that they were adopting. In the absence of a satisfactory agreement at the Congress, the party leadership was proposing the ultimate sanction of expulsion.

It was clear from the start that the left-wing had no intention of yielding, and that it was in fact threatening to set up a new political organization. It was also obvious that the majority of the party was not disposed to follow the "all or nothing" tactics of the leadership. On all sides, there arose demands that the leadership should adopt a more conciliatory attitude; and sensing the currents flowing through the rank and file of the party, the leadership did in fact follow a softer line in the period immediately preceding the Congress. The President of the party, for example, said that the Congress would be asked to condemn the Left's position in straight terms, but that afterwards there would be discussions between the interested parties in order to reach a satisfactory solution. It was hardly a logical position to take up but this was irrelevant. What was important for the Right was that it should appear to be adequately reasonable, and in this it succeeded.

The tactics of the Right did, in fact, divide the Left. One reason was that a section of the Left failed to understand what the Right was doing in its apparent turn towards a conciliatory position. A second reason was that some parts of the Left themselves adopted a more conciliatory position, echoing, as it were, the 'new reasonableness of the Right. The divisions on the Left showed themselves only too clearly at the Congress itself. Congress approved the general position of the leadership by a majority of 77 per cent against 23 per cent who voted against, or abstained. The discussion in Congress was a stormy one, but for the most part it avoided fundamental political problems and concentrated rather on the rights of minorities ("*le droit de tendance*") in a democratic party.

The divisions among the Left increased still further in the weeks

which followed. One group ranged itself with Ernest Mandel, the editor of *La Gauche*. The continuation of an opposition journal was now no longer compatible with the decisions at Congress and this group decided to establish a new political party. Another group, among whom were many Flemish supporters of *Links* and which included Ernest Glinne, an M.P.—who had an outstanding record of opposition to the Congo policy of military intervention—began discussions with the leadership on possible solutions to the problem of an opposition group. The result was an agreement which, without a doubt, limited their freedom but which did not suppress them completely. But the terms of the agreement were of only secondary importance: what really mattered was the split in the unity of the Left, and the restraints imposed upon those who remained within the party.

But this was far from the end of the difficulties of the Belgian Left. The decisive action in leaving a party—whether it was premature or not—in which the activity of the Left had always been circumscribed, inevitably led to many mistakes and errors of judgement in the organization and work of the new party. There were other problems, too, which greatly complicated the situation. The leaders of the M.P.W., for example, were mostly members of the Socialist Party. They were limited by the decisions of the December 1964 Congress, and they quite failed to co-ordinate their work with that of other groups of the Left. The Walloon leaders refused to accept the dictates of the Socialist Party leadership but at the same time they were not willing to take part in the foundation of the new party. So they found themselves in a political no-man's-land and their movement continued as nothing more than a pressure group. But even among the Walloon Socialists who did leave the Socialist Party to enter the new organization, there developed profound differences which led to new splits. Once again, the main cause of the disagreements revolved around the national problem. How to reconcile the struggle for federalism without sacrificing the basic position of a class party was the central question which was now debated. And it was the failure to answer this question which provoked new conflicts and led to new divisions.



The Belgian Left is now fragmented in the extreme. Those who split off from the Socialist Party at the beginning of 1965 grouped themselves mainly within a new organization—the Workers Socialist Federation (*Confédération Socialiste des Travailleurs*). The Federation is made up of three largely autonomous groups: the Walloon Workers Party, the Socialist Union (*l'Union de la Gauche Socialiste*) and a Flemish Socialist movement. The last named hardly exists and the Socialist Union is confined to the Brussels region. The Federation as a whole has only some 1,500 to 2,000 members and is represented

in Parliament by a single deputy, who was elected as a result of an agreement with the Communist Party. In its ideas and outlook, the Federation represents the traditional policies and attitudes of the extreme Socialist Left.

There is, in addition, on the left of the Socialist Party, a Walloon Party which is larger in membership than the Federation but which includes in its ranks a heterogenous grouping of nationalists and Socialists, with some of its leaders even claiming to be "ideologically neutral". But by far the greater part of the Left in Belgium is to be found either in the Walloon Popular Movement or in the trade unions. Recoiling from a political association which more often than not implies foolhardiness rather than courage, and repelled by all the quarrels and divisions, these left wing militants resigned themselves to a policy of which the only justification is that it permits them to maintain contact with the mass of the workers. And this contact is, of course, essential for all those who appreciate the size of the problem with which the Left as a whole is confronted.

The Communists, on the other hand, are not in a position to offer a Socialist alternative to the degeneration of Social-Democracy. They have themselves suffered from acute internal divisions. Belgium is the first country in Europe in which a Communist Party under Chinese guidance has been established. This party, aided by large financial subsidies, has been very active for more than two years, but so far it has demonstrated no more than the ineffectiveness of extreme sectarianism. Its few hundred members are unrepentant Stalinists. While it is true that this split has failed to do serious damage to the orthodox Communist Party, it has nevertheless helped to diminish the prestige of the C.P. at a time when it appeared as though certain trends were increasing its appeal. But the fact is that this split is only a relatively minor matter: at bottom it is their organizational weakness as well as their particular policies which combine to reduce the Communist Party to no more than an auxiliary force within the broader Labour movement. Although their opportunism is notorious, there is today an increasing self-awareness of their own weaknesses which is leading to the possibility of genuine discussion and collaboration between themselves and the non-Communist Left.

There remains the opposition which has stayed inside the Socialist Party and which continues a more thankless struggle than ever before. Its members have either not yet appreciated the fundamentally **anti-Socialist** character of their party, or the opportunity to break effectively with the bureaucratic machine has not, in their view, yet occurred.

However, the old structures do appear to be breaking up. The electoral disaster of which we spoke at the beginning of this article was a shattering event for the official leadership of the Socialist Party. Although the system of electoral representation, as well as the **tradi-**

tional inertia of the majority of the electors in Belgium results in a marked stability in the balance between the main political parties, the Socialist Party went down to an electoral defeat in May 1965 of major dimensions. Compared with the previous election, it lost 470,000 votes or one quarter of its electoral strength. The socialist share of the total votes cast has declined, between 1961 and 1965, from nearly 37 per cent to just over 28 per cent. This last proportion is the lowest recorded for the Socialist Party's vote since the introduction of universal suffrage. The fall in the number of deputies in Parliament in 1965 was roughly in the same proportion as the decline in total votes. Some 20 parliamentary seats were lost, reducing the total of Socialist deputies to 64, as against 84 in the previous Parliament. To underline the dramatic meaning of this shift in voting, it may be noted that since 1919 the average variation in the share of votes going to the Socialists has never been more than 2.5 per cent from one election to another.

Even this electoral disaster, however, has not resulted in any major upheaval inside the Socialist Party. It was expected, after the elections, that following normal parliamentary traditions, the Socialist Party would withdraw from the coalition government and would go into opposition. But this did not happen. The Christian Democrats were also shaken somewhat by the election results, and the alliance with the Socialist Party was renewed. The only difference in the new Parliament is that whereas the previous alliance had been between the Socialist Party and the left of the Christian Democrats, the new coalition aligns the same Socialists with the right wing of the Christian Democrats.

A defeat of the Socialist Right is not, unfortunately, a victory for the forces of the Left. The advance of the Left, in parliamentary terms, has been slight and, in terms of actual votes, was rendered less effective because of the inability of all Left forces to reach an electoral agreement. The Left as a whole only obtained a few seats out of a total of 212 in the Chamber of Deputies, but this is not in any case the ground on which it seeks victory. The Left today is not in a position to win a victory anywhere because organizationally it is too weak a political instrument. Nor does it seem likely in the near future to become an instrument such as could intervene *decisively* in the class struggle. It can only grow—slowly and organically—as a result first of the rapprochement and then later of the merger of all the groupings on the Left. In its long term strategy, the Left has to work out the full implications of a revolutionary position in terms of the neo-capitalism of our own time; and in this respect, the position of the Belgian Left does not differ in any fundamental way from that of the Left in Britain or in any country of Western Europe.

## NOTES

1. The Liberal Party in Belgium (which now calls itself "**Parti de la Liberté et du Progrès**") is the furthest to the right of the three main Belgian parties. Its strength rests upon the alliance of large-scale enterprise and parts of the middle and lower middle classes. Unlike the other two parties, it has managed in the last few years to avoid divisions based on the religious issue and has made remarkable progress.
2. From 1948 to 1962, the Borinage lost 50 per cent of its industrial manpower. Its decline has continued since then.
3. See M. Liebman, "La Grève des Médecins en Belgique," in *Les Temps Modernes*, July 1964.
4. In the Brussels Socialist Federation of the Belgian Socialist Party, the percentage of old-age pensioners has increased, between 1959 and 1962, from 10 to 24 per cent. In this Federation, some sections number up to 43 per cent of old-age pensioners. It is significant that the three sections with the highest percentage are all under Socialist administration. (See *La Gauche*, 14 December 1963).
5. On the strikes of 1960-1, see R. Deprez, *La Grande Grève* (1963); V. Féaux, *Cinq Semaines de Lutte Sociale* (1963); R. Gubbels, *La Grève, Phénomène de Civilisation* (1962); E. Mandel, "Les Grèves Belges: Essai d'Explication Socio-économique" in *Les Temps Modernes*, April 1964.
6. Including, in the beginning, an important part of the Christian trade unions. The latter's numerical strength is higher than that of socialist trade unions—812,257 against 698,721 in 1963. Most of the Christian workers went back to work after a public appeal by the Catholic hierarchy.
7. Brussels is the point of encounter of the two communities. More than 80 per cent of its population (over a million) is French-speaking, though often of Flemish origin. The cultural and social pressures towards a non-Flemish and even an anti-Flemish orientation, particularly in the bourgeoisie, are strong.
8. This applies mainly to two of the four Walloon provinces (Hainaut and Libge) which are industrialized; the other two (Namur and Luxemburg) are mainly agricultural and conservative. In the last elections, the Christian socialists obtained 43'84 per cent of votes in the Flemish part of the country (50'92 per cent in 1961) against 23.28 per cent in the Walloon part (30'12 in 1961). The Belgian Socialist Party obtained 24.7 per cent of the votes in the Flemish part (29'7 in 1961) against 35'7 per cent in the Walloon (47'10 in 1961). The Communist party obtained 1.7 per cent of Flemish votes (0.99 in 1961) and 10.6 per cent of Walloon votes (6'4 in 1961).
9. The Left opposition inside the Socialist Party has only gained support in national congresses from Walloon delegations. The Flemish delegations may be relied on to support the leadership. It may also be worth noting that the last figures available in regard to the membership of the Communist Party (1962) show 9,730 Walloon members, 3,122 Flemish and 1,681 in Brussels.