

50 years ago...

Winter 1960-61, the proletariat confronted the bourgeois State, its army, its parties, its unions...¹

Since the end of World War II that made the victory of the capitalist barbarism on the Communist revolution complete, all the promises of post-war peace, liberty and social progress proved to be pure lies. After having put the whole world to fire and sword in order to allow a new cycle of accumulation of Capital, the bourgeoisie prepared nothing but a new period of wars, sacrifices, austerity, and misery. Since 1955 it's the war of Korea that makes proletarians tremble with the idea of a third world war.

At the end of the fifties, the capitalist expansion phase that drew its vitality from the post-war reconstruction reached a weakening. Capital needed to readjust, its expansion cannot limit itself to reproduce its pre-war development, and it needed much stronger rationalizations, concentrations, reconversions, modernizations to follow up its accumulation. And according to the implacable rules of capitalism, to any progress of capitalist accumulation corresponds a consolidating of exploitation for the working class: to the necessity to make a step in the increase of the intensity of work and productivity, the bourgeoisie answers with austerity and recovery plans.

But the working class, hardly recovered from its second world massacre was not ready to suffer a new increase of its exploitation. All over the world it reacted violently and its returning strength made the bourgeoisie tremble: 1952 in Bolivia, 1953 in Eastern Germany, 1956 in Poland and Hungary, 1960-61 in Belgium...

In Europe it's all along the immense coal trail from the Midlands to the Donbas and through the Lorraine, the Ruhr, and Silesia, that the mining industrial basins have been shaken by the resurgence of the working class. And one of the biggest strikes of this time broke out in the little Belgium whose coal had made the fortune but whose industry could not live anymore only from coal.

Situation in Belgium

The post-war race to profits obliged all the capitalists of the world to frantically compete with each other. At the end of the fifties, the Belgian economy, which didn't had enough destructions and cadavers to its credit, had to give up in front of competitors having profited better from the war.

The immediate post-war was first a period of easy profits for capitalists in Belgium. The country had suffered little destruction and the harbour of Antwerp had been preserved. The Belgian industry could consequently be restarted more quickly than in most of the other countries in Europe. So in Belgium the bourgeoisie contented itself with running its production apparatus at full capacity without worrying too much about to reform it. But this lead of the Belgian economy has been quickly compromised as soon as it was confronted to the competition of more dynamic

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economies that had completely reformed their production apparatus. This lack of reconversion, rationalization accentuated since the end of the fifties the fact that the Belgian economy was going downhill in the race to profits. What materialized through a relative stagnation of the economic growth, hundreds of closures of factories, an elevated unemployment rate... problems made more crucial because of the creation of the Common Market in 1959.

But the thousands of proletarians threatened with unemployment or already rejected from work didn't let themselves to be deprived of their livelihood. In 1957, the steelworkers' strike paralyzed the big industrial centres. In 1959, the strike against the closures of coalmines in the Borinage became widespread in all the Hainaut. Then followed the strikes of workers in the textile industry in Ghent and workers of shipyards in Antwerp...

In spite of the propagation of the workers' agitation the bourgeoisie was not afraid. And to restore better conditions of accumulation it counted, as ever, before any "structural reform", on a consolidating of the exploitation of the working class.

Bosses, bankers... asked then a stabilization of public funds through a reduction of State's expenses in the social sector. In 1958, the rise of wages is curbed to 2% per year and it's in the name of the suppression of the "abuses" that "savings" are made at the expense of social security. In 1960, this anti-workers' offensive of the bourgeoisie got worse and took shape in the project of the "law for economic expansion, social progress and financial recovery". This "one-law" ["loi-unique"] gathered a series of measures attacking wages and jobseeker's allowances, prolonging the length of work...

- Strengthening of the control of activities of recipients of jobseeker's allowances: on workplaces, at home of unemployed,...
- Replacement of unemployment insurance by a system according to which a period of aid would follow the period of insurance, subject to control the incomes of the household,...
- Strengthening of the investigations about the benefits of the health disablement insurance: health care, industrial disablement,...
- Increasing the years of contributions before the retirement pension and additional deductions on wages for public service agents,...
- General increase in taxation: rise of taxes, new local taxes, increase in yearly taxes,...

Reaction of the working class

At the beginning, the bourgeoisie speculated on the interval between the moments when the various parts of the working class would be hit, according to the various modes of enforcement of the one-law, to dismiss any possibility of generalized workers' reactions. It counted on their spacing out, their isolation, to soften their combativeness and to restore calm as soon as possible. But the immediate and unanimous riposte of the working class since the very beginning of the discussion about the bill, without waiting for its enforcement, swept away these bourgeois desires. And the bourgeoisie had to confront a real general counteroffensive of the working class.

Since early 1960, whereas all the speeches of the bourgeoisie called for national solidarity, and demanded to agree to austerity in order to boost the economic expansion, the workers' mobilizations shake all the country.

Public service agents, whose wages and working time are especially attacked for “stabilizing the public funds”, unify their actions: national strikes and demonstrations against threats of sanctions for acts of strike... Little by little, ties are forged between all important sectors of the working class: between the local employees, railway workers, employees of ministries, teachers, workers of gas, electricity, coking works, dockers of Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent, electric construction workers, metallurgists, miners of Liege, Charleroi, the Centre and the Borinage... to prepare more general and united actions.

Since December 5th, 1960, the local employees decide to start an unlimited strike from December 20th, day of the very beginning of the discussion in the parliament of the one-law. In three days, the strike becomes widespread in all big industrial centres of the country.

Already the 19th, the workers of ACEC quit work, the strikers leave in several groups to make the workers of the other factories of the basin of Charleroi stopping work.

The 20th, the movement takes an unsuspected size. Triggered by the local employees, it spreads very quickly to the other sectors of the public services. It touches the big regions: Brabant, Liege, Namur, Charleroi, Mons, La Louviere and particularly Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp where port activity is paralyzed; moreover in Antwerp dockers join the movement.

Following the action of the workers of ACEC, the workers of other workshops, steelworks of the region of Charleroi come out on strike... the gendarmerie occupies a factory and installs chevaux-de-frise... the strike is even more massive. Strikers of ACEC clash against the gendarmerie that wants to block them the road.

In Liege the news coming from Charleroi and Antwerp spread like wildfire. The agitation develops; groups of workers circulate from one workshop to the other, from one factory to the other... Since the afternoon, the strike is total in metallurgy, from Cockerill-Ougree to FN-Herstal.

The 21st, the slow stoppage started the day before with railway workers gathers pace. In Liege and Charleroi the movement spreads more... strikers stop trams and send them back to the depots; on the roads demonstrators provoke other stoppages... the teachers join the strike.

The 22nd, the gendarmerie begins to harass strike pickets, to arrest people... the workers continue to send back to the depots trams protected by the gendarmerie... The strike in the public services spreads to the PTT [Post office and telecommunications service, translator's note], to Gazelco, to the marine, to ministries... The stoppage of miners who had begun separately the day before becomes widespread: coalmines are closed one after the other. In the basin of Liege, in the Centre, in the Borinage, in Athus... metallurgy, coalmines, railways, public services, department stores, textile factories... are totally paralysed. In the Black Country, the Centre and the Borinage, strike committees are set up and get coordinated. In Ghent and Antwerp the strike intensifies in the harbours, the public services and develops also in metallurgy, banks, department stores... In Brussels the “neutral zone” (i.e. the Parliament, the National Bank...) are under police control.

The 23rd, all the industrial centres of Wallonia, Antwerp and Ghent are completely paralyzed. The number of acts of sabotage against communication routes increases. The motto of a march on Brussels is launched... the gendarmerie is reinforced, it sets barbed wires and range armoured cars...

The second week of strike is marked by its continuous broadening, the deployment of the police and the violent confrontations between demonstrations, strike pick-

ets... and the gendarmerie. Demonstrations of dozens of thousands of strikers are organized in all big cities: 10,000 in Brussels, 25,000 in La Louviere, 10,000 in Ghent, 35,000 in Antwerp, 20,000 in Brussels, 45,000 in Charleroi, 10,000 in Verviers... and often end with clashes in the streets against the gendarmerie that protects the non strike-bound companies or those that try to continue to function by the using of scabs... The motto of a march on Brussels is there many time took up...

The 26th, paratroops and militaries are recalled to reinforce the gendarmerie, to assure the surveillance of bridges, level crossings and railway stations... The movement spreads massively in Flanders and becomes more firmly entrenched in Wallonia. In Brussels dozens of thousands of steelworkers come out on strike. The number of strike pickets increases. Women of strikers actively participate in supplying, in pickets...

The 27th, the closing of coalmines spreads to the Limburg. Country-wide, thousands of workers continue to join strikers, notably workers of the petrochemical sector. Gatherings of more than 5 people are forbidden...

The 28th, in Ghent violent confrontations oppose thousands of demonstrators to gendarmes. The working class answers by a new extension of the movement in Antwerp and in the region of the Rupel, in Bell Telephone, in Cockerill-Hoboken, in ship repair workshops, in Ford... and in the Limburg, in foundries, stove factories ["poêleries"], in Louvain, Bruges, Malines... The tramway workers decide to join the movement.

The 29th, violent confrontations again oppose thousands of demonstrators to gendarmes, in Brussels and Antwerp... The repression intensifies: harassment of strike pickets, arrests, searches, severe sentences... Demonstrators ask for the liberation of the jailed strikers. In the Borinage roadblocks are set up, cobblestones are dug up from the streets...

The 30th, signs of international solidarity appear: the German and Dutch dockers refuse to unload ships diverted from the harbour of Antwerp; some French dockers bring a financial support to the strikers... Violent confrontations take place again in Brussels and Verviers.

The third week of strike is marked both by the first return to work and other new strikes, by a certain stagnation of the movement and the constant stepping up of strike action in bastions like Liege, the Centre and the Borinage.

January 3rd, demonstrations of dozens of thousands of strikers are again organized all over the country: mottos of a march on Brussels and abandonment of work tool are taken up... but go unheeded: demonstrations remain on a local level, in the basin of Liege they are divided until eight different corteges and the blast furnaces are still burning...

January 4th, the strike knows a new extension in the region of the Rupel: in metallurgy, textile, plastic, brickyards, shipbuilding... and in Malines. Acts of sabotage are always more numerous... the repression always harsher. In Arlon the army occupies gasworks where the strikers refused to answer to the requisition.

The 6th, Liege is the scene of one day of riots. Starting from a 50,000 strikers gathering a few thousands of demonstrators flood over the city and lead violent clashes in the streets against the army: assault of the Guillemin railway station, barricades, cobblestones dug up from the streets, posts cut down... pitched battles where the workers show such a combativeness and self-organization that disconcert the army, attacks of bourgeois offices and newspapers...

The 9th, in view of the increasing number of acts of sabotages (e.g. dynamiting of railway lines, derailment of trains, barricades, assaults against public building, bourgeois printing houses...) 3,000 soldiers are recalled from Germany to occupy all the public buildings... in the Black Country (Centre and Borinage). The State is afraid of a workers' insurrection in this region where in spite of the military occupation, it's the working class that imposes its strike call all over the basin. The repression device is more strengthened and leads to massive arrests, strong disciplinary actions are taken against employees of public services who would like to continue the strike. There are still demonstrations of 40,000 strikers in La Louviere, 25,000 in Charleroi, 10,000 in Ghent, 20,000 in Huy...

The fourth week of strike is much more marked by the return to work of a more large number of workers at the same time that a bigger determination of workers who decides to go on with the strike. Strike pickets try to prevent giving up the struggle, but their action doesn't succeed in countering the disintegration of the movement. In spite of all the combativeness strikers don't find the necessary breath to continue the struggle. And finally the metallurgists are left on their own at the beginning of the fifth and last week of strike. The 21th, the return to work is complete.

Here we have related the big moments of this exemplary struggle that was the big strike of the winter 1960-61 in Belgium. Neither the calls for national solidarity, nor the delaying speeches, nor the threats... uttered by all the bourgeois factions, could prevent the explosion of the working combativeness.

“It's through the pressure of the street, through agitation and violence that some would like to settle the political problem while stripping our democratic institutions of their regular attributions. It's my duty as prime minister to denounce practices and unspeakable acts that are completely out of the fundamental requirements of a liberty system. One gives to certain strike movements an appearance of insurrectionary manoeuvres. Last night some criminal acts of sabotage were made, which could well endanger some human lives. In many case workers are deprived by force of their right to work. Agitators who are inspired by methods exercised in regimes abroad, who flout the human liberty, pour out a stream of excitation to hate and the worst violence. The right to strike is not contested in Belgium for the defence of professional or social interest, but how to tolerate such blatant deviations. It's more and more question about a crisis of the regime. It's true that there would be no democracy any more possible, if it's the street that governs and if it's not in the parliament anymore, before elected representatives of the nation, that the law is done. The one-law has been properly discussed by the parliamentary commission. It properly came into discussion in the House before being submitted to the Senate. It will come into force only if it is assured of an incontestably large majority. It's the rule of democracy.” (Excerpt from the broadcasted speech of the prime minister on December 24th, 1960)

Indeed, it's through “the pressure of the street, through agitation and violence”, “acts of sabotage”, “strike movements with an appearance of insurrection” that the sacrosanct democracy, its rights and liberties, have been endangered. No these are not “methods exercised in regimes abroad”, these are class methods, the same that the proletariat will still use to assault once again the bourgeois system, in Belgium and elsewhere, everywhere in the world. And these are the methods we claim, which revolt against the very democratic dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unlike all the rabbles who try to erase them from the workers' memory.

To the “rule of democracy”, to the “right to work”, to the “right to strike”,... brandished by the government, the working class answered by the organization of direct action, strike pickets, the organization of a real class unlimited strike, uniting all the workers in a same struggle against all the measures of austerity, equipping itself with its own organs of coordination and self-defence.

But how is it possible that after five weeks of struggle of such a dimension, paralysing all the economy, the working class ran out of steam and started work again, without having dragged any real concession out of the bourgeoisie? What are the strengths that prevented it to concretise this march on Brussels, to push the sabotage of the production until the abandonment of the machines and pits maintenance, until lightning out the blast furnaces... such actions that would have allowed the struggle to get this second wind it missed, such actions that would have directly attacked the bourgeois State? It's what we are going to try to explain thereafter.

[Translation has to be continued]