

World Socialism

ELECTION RESULTS IN BELGIUM

By HERBERT ZAM

The first reports on the Belgian elections, indicating a Socialist victory, have turned out to be exaggerated. Instead of a Socialist, or even progressive victory, the elections have been a victory for reaction, particularly for the newly organized fascist party, the Rexists. We have had occasion to refer critically in these columns to the Belgian coalition experiment in the past. The recent election has further demonstrated that in Belgium, as elsewhere, coalition has run true to form. Its results have been and can only be, disastrous for the working class.

The standing of the parties in Parliament is as follows:

	Now	Before
Socialist	70	73
Communists	9	3
Catholics	63	79
Liberals	23	24
Flemish Nationalists	16	8
Rexists	21	None

Since the total number of seats increased from 187 to 202, the losses of the Catholics, Liberals and Socialists were in reality greater than it appears. Taking the increase into account, the Socialists really lost nine seats, instead of three, the Catholics 22 rather than 16 and the Liberals 3, not 1. Since these three are the government parties, it is obvious that the election was a severe defeat for the coalition government.

Reactionaries Make Gains

It is clear that there was great discontent among the masses with the coalition government and its policies. An examination of the popular vote shows this in even starker form. In the face of a large increase in the popular vote the Socialists lost 130,000 (from 886,000 to 757,000). The Socialist vote sank from 37% of the total in 1932 to 32% this time. A large body of the Socialist voters expressed their dissatisfaction by voting for the Communists, whose vote increased from 66,000 to 143,000. In spite of this, the labor vote sank from 40% in 1932 to 38% in 1936. The increase in the number of blank and spoiled ballots (from 220,000 to 300,000) is another expression of discontent. (Voting in Belgium is compulsory).

The most serious of the danger signals, however, are positive, rather than negative. All of the reactionary parties were able to make strong gains, but the most astounding gain was made by the Rexists, the open fascist party of Belgium. The Flemish Nationalists, having strong fascist tendencies, doubled their strength. But the Rexist party, only six months old, was able to secure 250,000 votes, more than 10% of the total, and elect 21 members to parliament.

The Lesson Of Belgium

It is essential that Socialists and anti-fascists draw immediate lessons from the Belgian situation, so that there should not be repeated on a huge scale (let us say, in France) what is being enacted on a small scale in Belgium. Let us keep in mind that in Belgium all of the "orthodox" methods for preventing reaction and fascism have been applied: There is a united front between the Socialists and the "democratic" bourgeois parties, and this alliance controls the government; the Socialists are operating on the basis of a "plan," the famous De Man Plan, which has been extensively hailed as THE method of overcoming the crisis and moving toward socialism; the Van Zeeland coalition government put forth a whole series of measures for overcoming the crisis, and

was generally characterized as a "new deal" government. All of this, according to the supporters of coalition, should have made impossible the rise and growth of fascism.

Furthermore, there was no "Communist menace" in Belgium, which, we are often told, is a prerequisite for the growth of fascism. The Communists were a relatively small and unimportant party up to now. It is certainly not on the strength of any "red scare" that the fascists made their sensational gains. And yet, in the face of this carefully worked out reformist scheme, fascism and reaction advanced at an unprecedented pace. Can there be any other explanation except that the very measures which were to have checkmated fascism provided the basis for its rise and growth?

Comrade Arthur Wauters, a leading figure in the Belgian Party, in his analysis of the elections, correctly indicates that the growth of fascism arises from dissatisfaction with the Van Zeeland government. He points out that the electorate

"takes a serious view of the fact that the Government has not acted with more energy against the private capitalist monopolies; that it has not brought about a sufficiently strict control of the banks; that the price of money, although it has been considerably reduced, is still too high for the middle classes; that it has not carried out the administrative reforms which it undertook, or the readaptation of industry which Belgium must achieve after a prolonged crisis. In spite of the fact 125,000 unemployed have found work, the government majority has been the victim of the impatience of those who are still seeking employment. Their number exceeds that of those who have found it."

The Failure Of Coalition

In other words, the coalition government has failed in almost every respect. Would it not be better to admit this and draw the necessary conclusions? Is it anything more than self-deceit to declare that only "a small part" of the defeat is due to the shortcomings of the coalition, or that the "achievements" of the Van Zeeland government are "remarkable"?

Nothing else could possibly have been expected of the Van Zeeland government. By its very nature, a coalition government can only carry through half-hearted measures. It is paralyzed at every turn by the differences in its midst, differences which have their roots deep in the different class interests which the various parties represent. Therefore it can accomplish nothing but a weak maintenance of the status quo. That is all the Socialist-Catholic coalition could accomplish in Germany. And this is what promotes fascism, which feeds on the demagogic promise of a change, on a struggle against the status quo.

It is true that the Rexists, like the fascists in other countries, have drawn largely upon the "impoverished middle classes, tradespeople, peasants, and petty bourgeoisie." But aren't these precisely the elements who were to have been won away from fascism by the coalition? Even for this the coalition was impotent.

Belgium is merely underscoring the lesson learned from Germany and Austria: Fascism can be defeated, not by alliances with the bourgeoisie, but by sharp struggle against it; not by attempts to maintain the capitalist system, but by an uncompromising struggle for Socialism.