

The quarterly
newsletter of
Brussels Labour
International
Branch



Germinal

Autumn update

Belinda Pyke Chair, Brussels Labour

This autumn is proving to be a particularly busy time for the Branch and joint events with the sister parties are taking a prominent place.

Sister parties

Two joint Branch meetings have been organised since September. The first was a debate on intercultural dialogue and the issues at stake for social cohesion, organised with the Belgian *Parti Socialiste* in Saint Gilles, in partnership with the network of European Socialists in Brussels (SEB), on 21 September. The second was a joint meeting with the *Swedish Social Democrats in Brussels* on "the European Social Model: the Northern Approach" which was held on 18 October. An account of the first meeting is included in this edition and a report on the second will soon be on our website.

We are also pleased to launch a new feature in this issue: a sister party guest column which provides a means through which colleagues from our sister parties can contribute to our newsletter. On this occasion, Werner Wobbe, Chair of the SPD Brussels local branch has provided some thoughts and insights into the outcome of the German 2005 General Election.

Branch representation at Party Conference

Brussels Labour were delighted that

again one of its branch members was selected as Labour International (LI) delegate at Party Conference this year. Executive member Rachel Buchanan represented LI at the conference in Brighton from 25 – 29 September. Accounts of the conference are included from Rachel and also from Maria Neophytou, who attended the conference as a visitor from the Branch.

Other branch members attended conference, either through work or individual interest, ensuring that Brussels Labour again had a strong presence.

Forthcoming events



I would also like to take this opportunity to remind you that the John Fitzmaurice Memorial Lecture will take place on 23 November. The guest speaker will be Poul Nyrup Rasmussen MEP (above), President of the Party of European Socialists who will talk about democracy in Europe.

Our branch Christmas social will take place on St. Nicolas' day, 6 December, at Stephen Kinsella and Alice Jolly's house. More details are included further on.



Hampton Court was the venue for the social summit

Social summit

The informal European Summit at Hampton Court has just taken place. Despite extensive preparation with brainstorming sessions with EU academics prior to the summit and the production of discussion papers, it would appear that the meeting – condensed from 2 days into 6 hours – fell short of expectations. However, although there were evident divisions over the proposed globalization fund, Tony Blair confirmed his commitment to a Christmas deal on the post-2006 budget.

Many members who work in and around the European Institutions are following the UK Presidency closely and we intend to hold a special meeting in the new year to assess the presidency and its impact on EU policies and processes. Let us know how you think the UK has performed: contributions can be sent to the Editor at rachel.buchanan@skynet.be.

Germinal Editorial



Rachel
Buchanan
Newsletter
Editor

The focus of this edition of *Germinal* is on the recent Labour Party conference in Brighton and accounts from the Labour International delegate and the Brussels Labour representative are included. A report on a joint meeting with the *Parti Socialiste* in Saint Gilles on "Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion: a challenge for cities" can also be found in this issue.

Regular readers of *Germinal* will notice that the layout of this newsletter has changed. Many thanks to David O'Leary for the new design. Feedback on it is invited.

Contributions to the next edition
can be sent to
rachel.buchanan@skynet.be
by 15 January 2006.

Disclaimer: the views expressed
in this newsletter do not
necessarily convey those of the
Editor, the Brussels Labour
International Branch or its
Executive Committee.

Labour Party Conference

Conference diary

Maria Neophytou

According to the British press, the Labour Party Conference this year was characterised by leadership battles, the harassment of pensioners, and cocaine parties. Indeed it was astounding that for a conference teeming with journalists, it was so poorly reported. There was virtually nothing about all the post-election soul searching that went on in fringe after fringe about decreasing voter turnout and citizen disengagement from politics. Positive announcements such as the proposal for a new law on corporate manslaughter, measures to protect people's company pension contributions if their company collapses, and opening a 'new frontier of the welfare state' to provide universal childcare from the age of three, barely received any coverage. Is it any wonder that if only negativity and conflict make the news, journalists and politicians alike are among the least trusted people in the country?

For what its worth, delegates spent very little time discussing who should be leader and at a guess, if you tested the premises of most newspapers for drugs there would probably be traces of enough substances to open a pharmacy. But in terms of the other big story of the week, I was glad that Walter Wolfgang became such a celebrity. Conference is over-managed, the government is hyper sensitive of any criticism, and detaining an unarmed 82 year old man for heckling under the terrorism act highlights the lunacy of some of our anti-terror measures better than any fringe meeting. Walter aside, conference didn't reach the dizzy heights of Clinton- or Bono-mania this year. June Sarpong served breakfast for Oxfam, Eddie Izzard promoted Europe (somebody had to!) and Damien Hockney spoke on behalf of the smoking lobby about his 'right' to expose people in public places to his cancerous fumes and add more people with preventable illnesses to NHS waiting lists. International guests included Simon Peres, the president of Serbia, and the first female President of Mozambique. Luisa Diogo conveyed enough positive news

about increasing adult literacy and primary school enrolment, and declining levels of absolute poverty in Mozambique in her speech to conference, to ensure that the press did not deem it newsworthy.

I was delighted to bump into one of my former students among the international contingent, there as the delegate from our socialist sister party in Kosovo. This is the party which was formed out of the former Kosovo Liberation Army, once deemed a terrorist organisation hence barely a decade ago its members could not have travelled to the UK without risk of being arrested by Interpol. Fraternalising with such a person under today's proposed anti-terror measures could land me seven years in jail, which served as another reminder about the dangers of misconceiving and over reacting to present threats. As a self-confessed politics nerd, I crammed in as many fringe meetings as I could. With such titles as 'climate change commitments - up in smoke?' 'we blame the parents,' 'empowering gas consumers to empower themselves,' 'yeah but no but', 'kicking the fossil fuel habit', 'your local shop: its future,' and 'how hard can it be to clean a hospital?' who could resist? There surely wasn't an aspect of modern existence that didn't warrant the organisation of a fringe meeting. The IPPR roundtable chaired by Jon Snow with Neil Kinnock, Oona King and Tessa Jowell was the most fun: it's a shame so few of our current MPs have the charisma of Kinnock, and Jon Snow's comic timing was a revelation. His integrity is also a breath of fresh air in a climate when haranguing and bullying have somehow come to symbolise supposedly incisive broadcast journalism.

A 19-year-old asylum seeker from the Congo, who spoke at a Unite Against Fascism fringe, made the biggest impression on me. Despite coming under attack from guerrillas, who also destroyed the family home, the Home Office is sending her back to Congo as its says she isn't being persecuted. 'What do you expect,' she asked us, 'for me to go back and be killed for it to count as persecution?' She is training to be a midwife. We need midwives;

and she deserves a future of delivering babies not dodging bullets. How can we be so self congratulatory for our progressive policies on Africa and development when we treat people in such a way when they come to the UK?

The Guardian also organised an excellent fringe to launch its pamphlet on 'Islam, Race and Being British.' It was chaired by Madeleine Bunting, who has been the voice of moderation and reason since the London bombings, with an excellent line-up including one of the best speakers I heard at conference, the philosopher Tariq Ramadan. After the bombings I was immeasurably grateful that we have a Labour government during these difficult times, especially after enduring what the Tories in the European Parliament had to say about treacherous Imams and disloyal immigrants, and their gratuitous, inaccurate statements about porous borders. However there is still a debate to be had about the current proposals to detain terror suspects without trial and to imprison people for expressing sympathies with organisations deemed to be terrorist. With people still struggling to understand the phenomenon of the home grown suicide bomber, and the government striving for a balance between safeguarding individual civil liberties and ensuring the safety of the wider community, the debate has become worryingly polarised. In the midst of this, Tariq Ramadan was absolutely compelling. He argued that there is no inherent contradiction between being Muslim and being British, and that Muslims can integrate British civic values while maintaining the cultural traditions of their country of origin.



The ejection of Walter Wolfgang became a cause célèbre

He also put the onus on the education system to highlight the valuable contribution that immigrants make, and on each of us to take responsibility for the simplest of things, of reaching out to our neighbours, wherever they may be from. Multiple and shifting identities are enriching Ramadan insisted, and as long as there is mutual understanding between and within communities, they are not to be feared.

By Tuesday evening, there was only one question on everybody's lips: 'what did you think of Blair's speech?' Blair has impressed and inspired me on many occasions, not least when he won over a sceptical audience during his speech to the European Parliament earlier this year, but his conference speech was not one of these occasions. Anxiety about public service reforms, particularly relating to city academies and foundation hospitals, do not stem only from a jarring with Labour's core values, but from a very real concern about whether they actually work. Blair's flippant dismissal of such concerns and his pledge to go further than he has gone before came across as supercilious. Conciliation and caution, particularly when this drive to forge ahead with reforms isn't backed by evidence that they work, may not grab the headlines but they probably make for better government. But Blair's worse offence in my eyes was to denigrate the dreamers among us. For one thing, it came across as a schoolboy snideyness against Gordon Brown, in response to Brown's praise of the 'visionaries, optimists and idealists' who had abolished slavery and inaugurated free education and health for all. For another, if the future belongs to those who believe in the power of their dreams, what sort of a third term can we hope for if all we are aiming for is technocratic change and statistical gains in contrived targets and league tables? We won't be singing 'you may say that I'm a change-maker, but I'm not the only one' that's for sure.

Given that this is the Brussels Labour newsletter, you may be wondering why I have said so little about Europe. Well, the most telling comment I can

relay to you on the subject came from Peter Mandelson, who was the sixth speaker at the Progress Rally and yet the only one to mention Europe (we can take some heart from the fact that his comments were met with spontaneous applause). Real debate about Europe was consigned to the fringes along with gas consumption and the local shop. Even the Tories talk more about Europe than we do, and that's only to run it down. Debating Europe doesn't have to be defensive, we have much to champion too. We should be proud of our Herculean efforts to ensure accession negotiations with Turkey began on time, who else but the UK Presidency could have achieved this? But this message, that Britain is indispensable at the heart of Europe, is lost on the public and we as a government, and a pro-European political party, have a duty to convey sustained positive messages.

Conference certainly gave me plenty of food for thought. But it did leave me with an enduring sense of unease about where Labour is going in its third term. Protecting civil liberties and ensuring public safety undoubtedly involve some tricky calculations and I am not sure we have the balance quite right yet. Pressing on with public sector reforms, some decisively rejected by conference, seems hasty in the least - especially if, for instance, proposals to allow schools to opt out of local authority control get through with the support of David Cameron's Tory party, at the expense of our own backbenchers, as the press is currently speculating. And there is no doubt that Labour has not devoted enough time, energy or urgency into making the case for Europe. This conference will be remembered for the heavy-handed treatment of a pensioner who dared voice a criticism of the government which many people share.

Labour must be seen to practice the democratic pluralism it preaches: its backbenchers and party members are arguably more in tune with the public mood than the anti-immigration, anti-European, public sector-sceptic right wing press which it currently seems so afraid of confronting.

The International Perspective

Impressions from the Labour International delegate

As anticipated, the conference passed in a whirl of activity, providing lingering impressions of a massive task of organisation, many thought provoking speeches, endless rooms of exhibition stands, a full programme of fringe meetings on absorbing subjects, and lots of receptions and cocktail parties with canapés galore.

In and around the conference area, security was tight with repeated checks at the entry to each building. Queuing appeared to be the order of the day with queues for late accreditation dwarfed only by those of delegates wishing to enter the plenary hall to hear the leadership speech.

As delegate, conference was initially hard work - it took a while to get a feel for the duties and responsibilities which this role entailed. Advice from Labour International members proved invaluable, especially in terms of voting duties. Large amounts of time were spent in plenary, listening to the debates and ministerial addresses; time between was spent attending fringe events, including discussions on civil liberties; a debate on Unions: Labour's critical friends?, a talk on How does Labour win back the progressive vote; a discussion organised by the Fabian Society on Europe's future: can the left agree; and an interview with Jack Straw lead by Andrew Rawnsley from the Observer.

An intense week with many interesting ideas and opportunities to discuss current British politics and government policy, I appreciated very much this chance to attend the party conference as LI delegate.

Rachel Buchanan

Intercultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion: a Challenge for Cities

As part of its on going work with its sister parties, Brussels Labour organised in co-operation with the Belgian PS in Saint Gilles, in partnership with the network of European Socialists in Brussels (SEB), a debate on intercultural dialogue and the issues at stake for social cohesion on 21 September 2005. By Keir Fitch

Working with sister parties



The meeting was held to discuss the report on inter-cultural dialogue, coordinated by Professor Delruelle, echivan in St Gilles and professor at the Universté of Liege. Michael Cashman MEP explained the UK perspective on these matters, and Ed Van Thijn, former mayor of Amsterdam, explain the (rapidly evolving) Dutch position.

Ed Van Thijn explained that while theoretical models can be helpful, it is vital to consider the reality, particularly in the rapidly evolving situation after the Fortuyn and Van Gogh murders. Tension and polarisation between groups has increased markedly. A significant problem is that many educated immigrants – particularly Moroccans, now find it difficult to integrate, with the result that some become radicalised, creating a vicious circle. Thus the previous image of the Netherlands as a tolerant and pluralistic country (based particularly on having found a balance between protestant and catholic traditions) now appears to have been a thin veneer.

The original multi-cultural model of the 60's and 70's had been based on the idea of everyone working together to promote individual rights – late, in the 1980's, the alternative notion was developed of allowing the development of various collective group identities, between which individuals could chose. Thus it was for the individual to decide how far to assimilate. The current neo-conservative government has imposed a totally different approach, imposing rigid integration, meaning that all must adapt to the standards of the dominant culture. Essentially, this is forced assimilation, and many Muslims now feel under attack: for

example all are now blamed for the criminal activities of a marginal few. Van Thijn is thus convinced that the current government's policy is too humiliating for the minority and will thus fail.

What is necessary is genuine dialogue – “intertwining” – and this must be a real exchange of ideas, not simply tolerant indifference to each other. Failure to achieve dialogue would be very damaging since we live in a world of 5000 cultures set in 200 countries, according to the UN.

Michael Cashman offered a personal political perspective on UK policy. He argued there is no UK model, but rather a vision of how community relations should be. Public opinion is always reactionary – as with the current debate on Turkish EU membership, and on women's and gay rights in the past – and while politicians must certainly be aware of public attitudes, it is the role of progressives to be ahead of and lead the public. Equally, solidarity between minority groups should be encouraged, since the bigots target them all equally (e.g. the Brixton nail bomber).

Michael showed that it was entirely false to claim there was no difference between Labour and the Tories on human rights issues – for example the new Labour government had immediately agreed the Directive to implement Article 13 of the EC Treaty, which the Tories had been blocking. Similarly, Labour had incorporated the ECHR giving a more effective guarantee of basic rights in the UK. But for the UK, there was a very clear link between individual empowerment and economic empowerment: it was much more difficult for extremists to pick off those who are economically integrated. Hence much Labour policy was directed at economic matters, rather than simply promoting integration and dialogue.

Professor Delruelle explained the key findings of the Commission he had chaired. This had been created by the Belgian government, and had heard more than 50 groups. It was clear from this that there is no single Belgium model inter-cultural dialogue, but rather mixed approaches varying for ideological reasons. Nonetheless, the Commission decided to make various concert recommendations. In

particular, there should be a charter for all citizens, various institutional tools such as an integration observatory, and positive action to support minorities in areas such as housing, education and other public services. Work must also be done to provide access to languages.

It is vital that inter-cultural dialogue is not simply “inter-faith” dialogue, between the (sometimes self appointed) leaders of different faith groups. Culture should be seen as multi-dimensional – involving language, geography, history, art, law, etc., as well as religion – the last is not, and must not be used as, the only identifying factor. Essentially, we must be pluralistic, but the limit of pluralism has to be where the views being expressed are counter to the basic notion of pluralism and tolerance.

Delruelle also suggested that integration policy is different to policies to help disadvantaged groups in general – some immigrants for example can be highly trained and educated, yet still have far greater problems than European Belgians in getting jobs, housing etc.

There are policy differences between Flanders and Brussels – Flanders policy is focused on a narrow notion of aid to new arrivals, while Brussels has a rather unplanned free-for-all policy.

Other ideas being explored in St Gilles include the possibility of creating a museum of immigrations – which will explore the problems faced by first generation immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, and show how they faced similar problems to those modern immigrants face, and how they overcame these by gradually getting to know and be accepted by their neighbours.

Fundamentally, we must ensure that all groups are treated as part of “us” not “them” – and that we acknowledge and deal with our common problems.

Following the speeches, there was a substantial debate in which the ideas of the speakers were further developed.

Large majority for New Labour German style: the 'big coalition' as opposed to the Big Conversation

The outcome of the German election may cause surprise, if viewed from a distance. Two-thirds of voters opted for modest socio-economic reform; 10% percent preferred more radical market reform, epitomized by their vote for the liberals (FDP); and less than 10% supported the traditional left-ist position, holding against labour market and social security reform. As is now traditional in German elections, radical right wing parties obtained a marginal share of less than 2% - far below that of many other European countries.

The election campaign of the SPD - and in particular that of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder - fell short by one percentage point against the figure of 35.2% obtained by the two Union parties. This SPD result is subsequently viewed as a success, as polls had previously indicated a nearly 20% gap between the SPD and CDU/CSU. The vast majority of the media had also 'campaigned' against Schröder and the red/green coalition. Shortly after the election, a range of options for coalitions were discussed.

It was quickly seen that only a 'big coalition' between the two main competing blocks - the CDU/CSU and the SPD - could enter into negotiations. The Greens would not work with the Conservatives nor the Liberals with the SPD. Both smaller parties feared loss of face and in any case are unlikely next time to obtain sufficient electoral support

to attain the 5% threshold to qualify for seats in the first chamber (Bundestag). But wasn't there scope for a real 'leftist' coalition, comprising the newly merged party "Die Linke" (holding 52 seats spread between the former eastern German PDS, old west German SPD members and trade unionists), the Greens (48 seats) and the SPD (222 seats)? Unfortunately not. It would be hard to work with former members who had left the party in order to fight it from the outside as Lafontaine, former SPD chairman, did. SPD leaders would also not withdraw from 'Agenda 2010', the red/green socio-economic reform programme agreed at party congress, which is supported by the majority of Germans.

For what reasons would two opponent camps - the SPD and the CDU/CSU - choose to work together? Firstly, because of a widespread wish for viable reforms, shared by two-thirds of the German population. Secondly, for constitutional reasons. The second chamber (Bundesrat) represents the Länder and could block legislation if the SPD were to seek its own parliamentary majority in the first chamber (Bundestag). Prior to the election, the Bundesrat held a two-third conservative/liberal majority which already posed a challenge for Schröder's red/green government. Clearly, an advantage of this 'big coalition' is to overcome this potential block on legislation.

What might be the outcome of the coalition negotiations? The outcome could well be a continuation of the Agenda 2010 reform process, with German particularities: an emphasis on industrial policy, corporate tax reforms, continued piecemeal reform of the labour market, the health care system and the pension system. All elements of the welfare system envisage cuts and adaptations. In order to get a grip on the budget deficit, consumer taxes might rise, subventions may be cut and transfers to the new Länder (that amount to 4% of German GDP and are a large cause of budgetary problems) may be reduced. Education and research may well receive higher attention. In a nutshell, Germany will keep the structures of its welfare system, albeit with adaptations.

In terms of foreign policy, it is uncertain whether Tony Blair's expectation of a strong ally in Angela Merkel will see the day. Foreign policy is likely to continue along Gerhard Schröder's line with its awareness of German international interest, dependence from the US eschewed in favour of the Franco-German axis (as seen over Iraq) and a claim for a UN seat at its core. In any case, the new Foreign Minister has been appointed from the SPD.

This article was written one day after the agreement was reached by both parties; negotiations will probably run over the course of a month.

Germinal Noticeboard



The Winter Social will be held at Alice Jolly and Stephen Kinsella's house on 7 December from 7.30 p.m.

Their address is:
26 rue du Châtelain, 1050 Brussels



Congratulations
to Sarah Millar
and Thom Thorp
who married in Brussels
on 10 September 2005

Tribute

Robin Cook 1946-2005



On 6 August 2005, at the age of 59, our dear friend and colleague Robin Cook was taken from us after collapsing while walking in the Scottish hills he loved.

Robin's career spanned a lifetime of political activism in which he held the posts of Councillor, MP, Foreign secretary, PES President and Leader of the House of Commons. Shortly before his death, there was speculation that following a change of leadership he would return to the front bench before the next election.

Widely regarded as a man of integrity

and the greatest parliamentarian of our times, Robin's powerful oratory and incisive wit enraptured listeners.

He had an incredible ability of persuading his opponents to see things his way. One of his most memorable performances was his resignation speech in March 2003, in which he expressed his trenchant opposition to the Government's decision to go to war in Iraq, which was received with a standing ovation from fellow MPs.

As President of the Party of European Socialists from May 2001 to April 2004, Robin led the PES through a

challenging period which saw many changes, including the accession of new member state parties as full PES members. He managed astutely to build compromises and reach consensus between European socialist and social democratic parties from diverse political traditions.

Most recently, he was responsible for securing an agreement on the PES manifesto for the June 2004 European elections - a project in which I had the privilege of working with him. He is remembered and greatly missed by colleagues from the socialist family across the EU.

Gordon Brown stressed, in his moving eulogy at the funeral, that Robin's eloquence was driven by a vision of a better world: "Whenever or wherever there was poverty, injustice or unfairness, this is where Robin's voice became a mighty force locally, nationally and internationally."

Emma Reynolds

There is a memorial service for Robin Cook on 5 December 2005 at Westminster Abbey. If you would like more details, please contact Emma Reynolds at emma.reynolds@pes.org

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President of the Party of European Socialists

will give the

John Fitzmaurice memorial lecture

on

'Building a political Europe - the role of the PES'

23 November 2005 at L'Atelier, 7pm for 7.30 pm start
welcoming class of wine and pay bar afterwards

*Contributions to the next edition of Germinal
are invited by the Editor.*

*Please send these to rachel.buchanan@skynet.be
by 15 January 2006*