

Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Belgium)

By [Antoon Vrints](#)

Summary

The First World War had a decisive, but paradoxical impact on the development of labour movements in Belgium. The occupation abruptly interrupted the development of labour movement structures. In the longer term, however, the war and occupation meant the breakthrough of labour movements as significant mass organizations and stimulated their integration in Belgian national political life.

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Introduction

On the eve of the First World War the Belgian labour movement was fully developed and characterised by its ideological split and organizational diversity. From 1885 onwards the socialist *Belgische Werkliedenpartij/Parti Ouvrier Belge* (Belgian Labour Party, or BLP) tried to organize the entire Belgian working class and defend its interests as a whole. In order to do so, the BLP consisted not only of a political party, but also trade unions, mutualities and cooperatives. The BLP assembled existing labour organizations, founded new ones and aimed at centralization. In 1898 under the stimulus of the BLP the *Syndicale Commissie/Commission Syndicale* (Syndical Commission) of socialist and independent trade unions was founded to coordinate union life on a national scale. There was a certain suspicion of the BLP among Belgian elites, because of the party's presumed internationalist and revolutionary tendencies. In reality, the pre-war BLP followed a reformist, parliamentary track and expressed its support for national defence in the face of a foreign invasion. The Catholic Party which had ruled [Belgium](#) since 1884, nonetheless considered the BLP's reformist policy aimed at

political (through general suffrage) and social (through social legislation) democratization as a threat to its power. In order to contain socialism and to reconcile different social classes, a rapidly expanding catholic labour movement was structured, resulting in 1912 in the *Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond van België* (ACV). Among catholics there was fierce discussion between orthodox corporatists (who favoured mixed corporations encompassing employers and employed in a particular sector) and partisans of an autonomous catholic labour movement. Particularly for the development of the socialist labour movement, the First World War impacted paradoxically on this quickly evolving landscape, varying between an interruption in the short term and a breakthrough in the long term. In order to explain this apparent paradox, this article addresses both the strategies the labour movements developed to cope with the changes provoked by the war and the evolving relationships of the labour movement towards the Belgian war effort and elites.

Support for the war effort

The German invasion provoked indignation and a strong nationalist reaction among Belgian population and political elites. In the spirit of national unity, a truce was proclaimed that officially suspending political struggle as long as the war lasted. The socialist labour movement participated in the national political consensus of August 1914: it supported the Belgian war effort against the German invader without hesitation. In a manifesto to the Belgian population the BLP legitimized Belgium's resistance against the invaders' "militaristic barbarianism" by stressing that it contributed to the defence of democracy and political liberties. The violation of Belgium's [neutrality](#) justified the decision to resist the German aggression, a point of view reflecting the party's pre war's stance on the right of national defence. A number of prominent party members – even the leaders of the Marxist left-wing [Hendrik De Man \(1885-1953\)](#) and [Louis de Brouckère \(1870-1951\)](#) – volunteered in the Belgian army. Convinced of the need to associate the BLP to the war effort, Belgium's ruling elites overcame their (remaining) pre-war suspicions. To conceal this association symbolically, [Emile Vandervelde \(1866-1938\)](#), the BLP's president, was nominated Minister of State at the beginning of the invasion. The BLP's position went further than acceptance: the party fully supported the Belgian war effort and continued to do so during the entire war.¹ In 1916 socialist (and liberal) ministers joined the war cabinet, thereby ending three decades of exclusive catholic rule.

In contrast to other western European socialist parties, the BLP stuck to its patriotic stance from the beginning to the very last days of the war. The socialist labour movement as whole firmly rebuffed the occupier's attempts to seduce it with the prospect of German social legislation. Only a tiny minority of Dutch speaking socialists joined the [Flemish-nationalist collaboration movement](#). Pre-war contacts with German social-democrats were deliberately

cut. The Belgian secretary of the Second International, [Camille Huysmans \(1871-1968\)](#) participation in the attempt to organize an international socialist conference in Stockholm, was met with indifference or even hostility from Belgian socialists who identified with the Belgian war cause. A number of predominantly Walloon intellectuals within the labour party such as [Jules Destrée \(1863-1936\)](#) turned into outspoken Belgian nationalists during the war. This nationalist turn seems to have been less pronounced among Dutch speaking socialist leaders like [Edward Anseele \(1856-1938\)](#) or indeed Camille Huysmans.

Keeping the Structures Intact

On first inspection, the [occupation](#) seems to have caused a standstill in the development of the labour movement in Belgium. Labour organizations in the occupied country were handicapped by the exile of a vital part of their leadership and militants, the mass unemployment among workers, the restricted possibilities of mobility and communication and, importantly, the repressive occupation policy. The occupier curtailed the constitutional right of assembly by banning activities of political parties and trade unions and suppressed freedom of expression through [censorship](#). However, behind this image of collective inactivity a more complex reality is hidden. Faced with the difficulties of the occupation, the leaders of the labour movements tried to maintain their structures in order not to lose contact with the working class. The strategy concentrated on those activities which were tolerated by the occupier. This left still considerable room for activity, since the occupier only superficially banned public gatherings. Trade union activities largely came to a standstill, but the labour movements as a whole did not. In order to respond to the needs of a population facing severe material difficulties as a result of the occupation, they concentrated their efforts on support for the unemployed, the organization of food relief and the expansion of cooperatives. In the context of the patriotic truce ("[sacred union](#)"), representatives of the labour movements were integrated in [National Committee for Aid and Food](#) that imported and distributed consumables among the needy in occupied Belgium. This committee founded by a group of important financiers and industrialists at the beginning of the war functioned as a kind of semi-official government in occupied Belgium. The socialists considered their presence as a means of gaining recognition as a normal "national" party and strategically important for the post-war period (they therefore scrupulously guarded their representation in the Committee). As part of this cooperation the officious National Committee transferred the authority to pay out unemployment benefits to the trade unions. This was not only a decisive step in the integration of the labour movement into the political system, but it also attracted many new members. On a number of occasions, the labour movement's strategy went further than keeping structures intact and discretely occupying terrain. Public protests against the deportation of Belgian workers by the occupier and the [food scarcity](#) are examples of more overt stances of the labour movements. Belgian workers in exile in [the Netherlands](#), [France](#)

and [Britain](#) escaped from the German restrictions on union activities and were active in Belgian [refugee](#) unions.

In spite of the apparent stand-still, the First World War created the preconditions for the structural breakthrough of the labour movement. Between 1918 and 1921 Belgium was socially and politically democratized.² Against the background of the [Russian](#) and [other revolutions](#), Belgian ruling elites were willing to grant concessions to the labour movement (for example, the introduction of universal single suffrage for men, the abolishment of article 310 of the penal code limiting the right to strike, and the expansion of social legislation). As a result of political democratisation and in line with its pre-war reformism and its war time loyalty, the BLP could become a partner in a coalition government. The BLP contributed to dispersing potential revolutionary demands by translating popular discontent into concrete realizable and tangible demands. For the trade unions the war initiated a breakthrough as well. The socialist labour trade unions proved more successful than their catholic counterpart in keeping their structures and popular support intact during the occupation. Before the war both movements had had about as many members (120,000 in total). After the war, the membership numbers of the socialist labour movement skyrocketed (700,000 members in 1920), while those of the catholic labour movement did not (120,000 members in 1920). The expansion of trade union membership was particularly evident among civil servants and workers in big industrial companies. The rising number of members was not only due to the strong appeal of the message of social and political democratization in the post war period, but also to the capacity of the unions to pay out unemployment benefits.

Strikes

Concomitant with suspension of trade union activities, strikes are generally believed to have been a marginal affair in occupied Belgium.³ Mass unemployment in many industrial sectors, centres of pre-war striking activity, is believed to have contributed to making the strike an “obsolete” weapon for most workers. If strikes are given any attention, it is mainly reserved to so-called “[patriotic strikes](#)”, inspired by the refusal of workers in strategically sensitive sectors such as the railways, the arms industry or machine construction to work for the enemy. Strikes in relation with material concerns (such as wages, food and labour conditions) are believed to have been limited. The question is whether these assessments are realistic or coloured by the tendency to minimise inter-Belgian conflict against the dramatic background of the history of the war. Indeed as a result of the restriction of the unions and massive unemployment, could the strike weapon be used to defend material claims?

In a few industrial sectors striking remained active in the context of labour disputes. The pre-

eminent sector in which the strike weapon was frequently deployed was mining.⁴ This finding can be ascribed to two factors. Firstly there was a strong sense of class among miners and an explicit tradition of organised social action. Secondly employment in mining, in contrast to other industrial sectors during the occupation, largely stayed intact. As early as autumn 1914, production was re-started and due to the strategic importance of Belgian coal production the occupier was very anxious to keep the mines productive. The geographical connection of production to particular sites meant that the mining sector naturally suffered far less than other sectors from the occupier's requisition of production resources. In addition, because of their permanent participation in the working process and the strategic importance of their industry to the occupier, miners were able to continue deploying strikes as a means of exerting pressure. The miners' strikes were diverse in duration and scope. A number of strikes remained limited to one or two days and one or two companies. But on the other side of the spectrum great waves of strikes that lasted for ten days or more paralysed production in entire basins. Mobile strikers' pickets were crucial for such supra-local mobilisation.

The root cause of most strikes is clear: the declining standard of living. The 1915 actions focused on wages and employment conditions: the miners wanted to reverse the 25 percent reduction in wages and the concessions in working hours that they accepted at the restart of the mines, as coal production had returned to pre-war levels. As the focus shifted to the consequences of shortages and high food prices, the scope of industrial action widened to exceed employer/employee relationships. The position of miners was comparatively strong, more than other groups they were able to defend their claims to food. The mining companies foresaw allowances on top of the wages and company shops where food could be bought at low prices. The Germans were very anxious to keep the coal mines open and productive. Additional rations for miners fitted in with that policy and moreover miners were exempted from all kinds of deprivations such as the requisition of mattresses. Paradoxically, both in Liège and Hainaut, the relatively privileged group of miners formed the vanguard of the protest.⁵

The workers at gas works, power stations and water distribution companies, sectors that also continued to be operational, were in a similar position. This offered leverage for collective action: for example in October 1917 the workers of the gas works in La Louvière stopped work to demand higher wages and more food, the impact of which was felt all over the centre.⁶ Due to the strategic importance of these companies the occupier was very keen to maintain production levels. As with workers in other industries that were important for the war effort, the occupier provided additional food rations.

As a result of massive unemployment through the closure of factories, the strike weapon was not effective in other industrial sectors to defend claims to food. The censored [newspapers](#) analysed did not report any strikes in those sectors before the winter of 1917-1918.⁷ Going by the same press there was occasional strike activity at suppliers and subcontractors of public administration and the National Committee. In view of their permanent activity they did have the possibility of striking. From the winter of 1917-1918 this picture started to change. The strike weapon was no longer exclusively deployed by miners and suppliers to authorities or aid organisations. For the first time there were strikes by employees of public administrations (public transports personnel or even local police in cities like [Brussels](#) and Liège), aid organisations, trade (for example the strike of employees of the Brussels department store *Grand Bazar*) and the recreational sector (for example the strike among musicians in Brussels, Ghent and Liège). The absence of social protest among such professional groups during the first three years of occupation was that they, in contrast with miners in particular, were open to the argument that they were granted special rights because they still had a job and an income. Apparently they were more sensitive to the notion that it was “not patriotic” to argue for social claims while there was such high unemployment. The fact that these professional categories, which generally belonged to the middle classes, had a far less-developed strike tradition than miners for example and that for a long time considerations of respectability kept them from proceeding to public action may also have played a part. Finally these groups to a certain extent had savings in reserve that could be used in times of need. As a result of the high food prices, during the second half of the occupation impoverishment gained an ever-increasing grip on the employed in the middle classes. The objective need augmented and the power of the patriotic argument started to erode in these circles too, especially during the powerful German [spring attacks of 1918](#). It is probably no coincidence that virtually all strikes found in the press in this category occurred during the spring and summer of 1918. The aim of these actions was in the first place concerns about daily bread: the striker pursued an increase in wages or rations in kind. Working hours also led to discontent; the fact that they had been extended in many sectors because of the absence of staff became increasingly more difficult to bear. Although it may be clear that historians incorrectly minimised the importance of strikes in the occupied country, it is obvious that strike activity in occupied Belgium was far less than in the pre-war years. Strikes were limited to the few industrial sectors that were not discontinued, although from the spring of 1918 an expansion to other sectors can be observed, a cautious trend that was interrupted by the reversal of warfare.

Once the occupation was over, an impressive wave of strikes was initiated that lasted until 1920. After the long years of deprivation, discontent among workers resulted in massive (often wildcat) strikes claiming for better wages, more food and a reduction of working hours.

The labour movement and the government tried to get a grip on the dynamics of this grass-roots protest movement. In exchange for contributing to social peace in a crucial age of national recovery, the labour movement aimed at consolidating its role in labour relations. Making use of the social unrest, the government (particularly the socialist Minister for Industry, Labour and Provisions, [Joseph Wauters \(1875-1929\)](#)) stimulated the creation of joint committees consisting of unions and employers and collective bargaining agreements to contain social conflict. This strategy of social pacification proved to be successful. Union leaders acted in accordance with the overall reformism of a Belgian labour movement ready to moderate its immediate demands in exchange for institutionalized social dialogue.

Gender

Due to the quick occupation of most of the territory, the contrast between a predominately female home front and largely masculine war front never became as delineated in Belgium as in other belligerent countries.⁸ Men and women experienced life under occupation together. [Belgian women](#) (the female refugees abroad excluded) did not replace mobilized men in the production process. However, this did not mean that gender relations in the work place in Belgium were not affected by the war. The occupier's decision to limit political and social life in public and the mass unemployment reduced traditional areas of male sociability. As a result men were largely confined to the domestic sphere. In order to avoid competition by women for the few remaining jobs, women were stimulated to leave the regular labour market through allowances for housewives or by confining them to traditionally female jobs. The pre-war tendency towards a mixing of the job market was reversed.

The accented gender segregation on the remaining job market was reflected in union life under German occupation. Within the unions, the gender specific activities of women's sections were largely suspended. Union women reoriented their activities to charity and schooling of future leaders. For the *Algemeen Secretariaat der Christelijke Vrouwenvakverenigingen* this option would become permanent. As women's position on the labour market weakened during the war, their participation in enterprise based collective action remained limited. Striking during the occupation was mainly a male affair; the focal point of strikes during the war lay in mainly male sectors such as mining. As the scope of the strikes broadened in the last year of war the participation of women also increased; in the Grand Bazar strike the majority of the striking shop staff were probably women.

Conclusion

In comparison with other European countries the history of the labour movement in Belgium during the First World War is specific in two respects. Firstly, the movement was confronted

with an occupation which disrupted social and economic life and limited the possibilities for overt social (in particular collective) action. This apparent stand-still did not however block the development of the labour movement in the longer run. Secondly, the occupation stimulated the rapprochement between the labour movement and the bourgeois elites. The support for the war effort was in Belgium never seriously questioned by the Belgian labour movement.

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Notes

1. Liebman, Marcel: Les socialistes belges 1914-1918. Le POB face à la guerre, Brussels 1986. [↑](#)
2. Scholliers, Peter: The policy of survival: food, the state and social relations in Belgium, 1914-1921, in: Burnett, John/Oddy, Derek (eds.): The Origins and Development of Food Policies in Europe, London & New York 1994, pp. 39-53. [↑](#)
3. Pirenne, Henri: La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale, Paris/New Haven 1929, p. 163. [↑](#)
4. General State Archives, Brussels, T065, Mining Administration, 308, Mons section. [↑](#)
5. Vrints, Antoon: Sociaal protest in een bezet land. Voedseloproer in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog [Social protest in an occupied country. Food riots in Belgium during the First World War], in: Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis, 124/1, (2011), pp. 30-47. [↑](#)
6. Vooruit, 21 October 1917. [↑](#)
7. In order to cover press reports on strikes to a maximal extent, I systematically screened following newspapers edited in the five biggest Belgian cities: Antwerp: Het Vlaamsche Nieuws (1915-1918), Brussels: Le Bruxellois (1914-1918), Charleroi: La Région de Charleroi (1915-1918), Ghent: Vooruit (1914-1918), Liège: Echo de Liège (1915) and Le Télégraphe (1915-1918). [↑](#)
8. Gubin, Eliane: Bespiegelingen over sekse en oorlog in België, 1914-1918 [Reflections on sex and war in Belgium, 1914-1918], in: Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis, 8 (1995), pp. 33-48. [↑](#)

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External Links

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