



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Trade Unions in Belgium

Author(s): Laurent Dechesne

Source: *The Economic Journal*, Dec., 1905, Vol. 15, No. 60 (Dec., 1905), pp. 527-534

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Economic Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2221174>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Royal Economic Society and Oxford University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Economic Journal*

TRADE UNIONS IN BELGIUM.

IN 1791 the *Assemblée Constituante*¹ passed a decree prohibiting in future the formation of any kind of professional association whatever, thus sealing with its sanction for an indefinitely long period the principle of *individual* competition. The penal code of 1810 imposed heavy penalties on any coalition of employees or employers which aimed at influencing the price of labour. In 1830, however, the Belgian Constitution showed a more liberal spirit. It declared the right of association. In France, on the other hand, that right was only won for labour when the law recognising the corporate personality of trade unions was passed in 1884. Nevertheless, the advantages which the Belgian law of 1830 seemed to confer on the working classes were more apparent than real. In spite, namely, of the text of the constitution sanctioning freedom of association, the interdict laid on all coalitions instituted to influence wages was maintained and applied as long as the statute survived in the penal code, *i.e.*, till 1866. In France, coalition ceased to be a crime from the year 1864. Even then the repeal of the statute of 1810 was only succeeded by fresh measures against the abuse of the right of striking, measures which were made yet more stringent in 1892. And finally, even in 1898, the legal personality of trade associations was acknowledged only with many reservations, on which account nearly all trade unions have avoided having recourse to this law.

Such are the legislative conditions under which the associative movement in Belgium is going on.

Belgian trade unions are by no means of a uniform type. On the contrary, they present a great variety of forms, according to the date and technico-economic circumstances of their inception. Some date from a bygone political *régime*, some are "syndicates"

¹ That is to say, the French legislative body which, at the beginning of the Revolution, superseded the States General with the object of establishing a constitution for France. Belgium, soon after, became a French possession till the year 1815.

of the most recent type. We may briefly review these different varieties in their historical order.

There are in Flanders some corporations which trace their origin to the Middle Ages. They are now degenerate and decadent. Of such is the Community of Bakers at Bruges, the Guild of Brewers' Draymen, which still holds the monopoly of the transport of beer throughout municipal territory, the Guild of Coalheavers, and that of Grain Transport. At Furnes, there are also Guilds of the two last-named, which are officially recognised by municipal administration, and the Corporation of Sackporters, founded over two hundred years ago. At Malines there are the tun-carriers, whose corporation is said to date from the thirteenth century, and the Community of Bakers, whose existence is seriously affected by the free competition of small bakers.

The constituents of these societies have nothing in common with the wage-earners of our modern industries. They are either master-craftsmen owning their own rudimentary plant, like the bakers of Bruges, or workmen who do not in any way co-operate in production, but simply supply unskilled manual labour, as, for instance, the grain and coal carriers.

Their regulations still contain measures designed to protect consumers against the inconveniences incurred through corporate monopolies. Some of the associations have retained their original religious character. The membership of these societies is a diminishing quantity. They are nothing more than the ruined monuments of a remote past, and are interesting to-day only from a historical point of view.

When the law against coalitions struck a blow at the formation of fighting unions, the spirit of association took refuge in societies for mutual aid or friendly societies (*mutualités*). We meet with these societies from the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were then called "common purses" (*bourses*), a name resembling greatly that of the Purse clubs or Box clubs, which seem to have occupied, during the middle of the eighteenth century, an analogous position in the history of English unions.¹

The first friendly societies, in superseding the corporations of the *ancien régime*, retained at first their religious and professional characteristics; moreover, they included both masters and workmen. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century they underwent transformation. Some, in continuing to be occupied with mutual aid, lost their distinctive professional character, and opened their ranks to workmen of different trades. Others added

¹ See my *Industrie de la Laine en Angleterre*, p. 154. Paris, Larose.

to their business of mutual aid that of the defence of trade interests.

It is the latter which have thus given birth to the first organisation of workmen comparable to the modern trade union. The religious character of the old "mutuality" is lost. The masters withdraw. The trade characteristics are preserved and emphasised. Such are the features of the associations of manual workers as they appear to-day. Their tactics consisted at first in getting the supply of labour into their hands by limiting apprenticeship, so as to hinder the fall in wages resulting when the supply was in excess of the demand.

Among the more important industrial labour societies we may mention that of the Typographers, founded, from 1842 onwards, in the chief cities of the country, the Philanthropic Union of Hatmakers, the Association of Workers in Bronze, the Glovers' Union, &c.

These industrial associations occupy an important position in the history of the groupings of labour in Belgium. They are the first unions formed for resistance. Several underwent considerable development. And down to the present day it is among them that the most powerful and best organised groups are to be found.

They have, however, been frequently compelled to save their existence by suspending their methods of limiting apprenticeship. Competition in mechanical industry rendered this often impracticable. At the present day they are mainly occupied with the opposing of technical improvements and of the employment of women. Some societies have tried in vain to affiliate workers in mechanical industries, and, in those cases where machinery has entirely superseded hand industry, they have been unable to survive. Groups of this kind did not suit the worker in machine industries. Hence the origin of the trade unions connected with the great mechanical industries—new associations having a less stable membership, and, as their main object, the struggle for better conditions of labour. They made their first appearance at Ghent, in 1856, in the cotton industry. Their development was for a long time delayed by the law against coalitions.

From the year 1867 associations of working-men, under the influence of the *Internationale*, took a Socialistic character. The most important groups that affiliated themselves were the unions of Ghent, centre of the cotton industry, the *Francs Ouvriers* of Verviers, centre of the woollen industry, and the *Solidarité* of Fayt in Hainault, the centre of the collieries. From 1869 the

number of unions increased with extraordinary rapidity. But the fall of the International and the crisis of 1873 put a dead stop to the movement.

In 1886 the Belgian labour party undertook to reorganise the working-class population. Thus at Ghent there appeared Socialist unions, then at Verviers the Metal-workers, the only society of importance in the place, even at the present day, which is affiliated to the labour party. At Brussels the reorganisation of associations began in 1885, and in the coal districts in 1886.

The example of the labour party incited other political parties to try, under an extension of the franchise, to win the working-class vote and to oppose the effect of specific theories. The Catholics began, the Liberals followed.

The Catholic associations do not appear, especially at their inception, to have been unions composed exclusively of working men, and occupied with their emancipation. They were rather of the nature of benevolent clubs (*patronages*), reuniting both wage-earners and employers. They were placed under the direct influence of the priests, and their ostensible aim was chiefly moral—to wit, the preservation of the religious spirit and the maintenance of good relations between employers and employed. Nevertheless, the more recently formed centres no longer include masters. They acknowledge the principle of the emancipation of the working classes by the workers themselves, and they thus repudiate the system of “patronage” and the guardianship of the *bourgeoisie*.

The Liberal party, seeking to gather to itself its former adherents among the working classes who had gone over to the Socialists, also tried its hand at the organisation of unions. A rash undertaking for a party whose power lies chiefly in the industrial and commercial *bourgeoisie*! Nor have its efforts produced any result.

There are no complete and definite official statistics of Belgian labour associations yet published. Nevertheless, by having recourse to a variety of sources we have succeeded in drawing up the appended table, which will give at least an approximate idea of the actual situation in the Belgian world of unionism.

Of the whole male working class population the unions to-day amount to about one-fifth. Taken by trades, this proportion by no means always holds good. Among the glass-blowers the proportion of unionists is about three-fifths, among the miners about two-fifths. In the Verviers district nearly all the workers in combed wool are affiliated to the same federation.

Very few women belong to unions. Their numbers do not amount to one-twentieth of the union membership. Those who do belong are nearly all employed in cotton-spinning.

BELGIAN TRADE UNIONS.

I.

Unions affiliated to the Labour Party. 1,000's of members :—	
Mining Industry	45
Textile Industries	7·5
Metallurgy	7·1
Stone Industries	4·5
Transport Industries	3·2
Clothing Industries (including shoes)	2·9
Other Unions, with a Membership of 15,000 to 20,000... ..	17·8
	<hr/>
	88

II.

Neutral Unions.

Glass Trade	5·9
Book Trade	2·5
Other Unions	7·6
	<hr/>
	16

III.

Christian Unions.

Federation of Shoemakers	·7
„ „ Tailors	1·1
„ „ Bakers (employees)	·1
„ „ Metal-workers	1·1
„ „ Wood-workers	1·2
„ „ Builders (employees)	1·4
„ „ Textile-workers	3·2
Not included in the foregoing	5·9
	<hr/>
	14·7

IV.

Trade Friendly Societies.

Mostly Neutral	10
	<hr/>
Grand Total	128·7

Fifteen years ago M. Vandervelde's inquiry elicited the proportion of union members as one-seventh, as compared with the one-fifth of to-day. The advance is more apparent when the absolute figures are taken—thus, there are to-day 130,000 as compared with 60,000 to 70,000 in 1891. It is, above all, the organisation of the constitution of the several unions that has progressed. Subscriptions are higher and are more regularly paid. Their functions have become more complex. Institutions for mutual aid have developed. Propaganda is more active and better distributed. The number of permanent secretaries is greater. The unions have increased their influence by amalga-

mating into larger groups, and the federal movement is winning over the country and extending by degrees to the international body of unions.

Unionist organisation is unequally developed among the different political parties contending for the labour vote. The socialist unions amount to almost seven-tenths of the whole. Next come the neutral and Christian unions, each balancing the other in importance, and each absorbing over one-tenth. The Liberal unions are of no great importance.

The rate of subscription varies very much, fluctuating between 10 and 50 francs a year. As to reserve funds, out of 214 groups only 92 pay out anything for strikes. The others allow disbursements for a variety of causes:—not only for strikes, but also for want of employment, illness, old age, &c.

Apart from the advantages by way of mutual aid secured to members by the unions, they have unquestionably exercised a considerable influence on the rate of wages. Either they have, in favourable circumstances, brought about a rise, or they have retarded or diminished a fall at an adverse conjuncture. This is especially evident in factory unions. The influence has been more felt in those industries where there has been the least introduction of improved machinery and, in consequence, the least competition of workers without apprenticeship. Nevertheless, even in the largest manufactories the influence of unions on wages is beyond doubt. It has sometimes been even strong enough to induce employers to remove their factories to the country, so as to get away from the exactions of unionist workmen. Such is the case in the Ghent cotton industry.

The relations between employers and employed have ameliorated wherever unions have taken strong root. This is well shown among the metal-workers at Brussels. Conflicts may arise frequently, but many end amicably after discussion. The workmen's delegates have sometimes conceded the question to the employers without losing prestige. At Brussels the masters and unions are on especially friendly terms, and there are even some employers who expect, on engaging a man, that he should show a certificate of union membership.

In the provinces, it is true, the situation is not so good. As a general rule, the masters continue to be more hostile than favourable to the very existence of the unions and to a collective wage-contract. And this is managed as yet by imperfect and irregular methods.

It is difficult to estimate exactly the action exercised by the labour associations in the direction of education, culture, and

morals ; but this cannot but be of considerable importance. The unions have developed the spirit of mutual assistance and solidarity. Their classes and libraries concur in educating their members, and the management of working class societies—*mutualités*, co-operative societies, and unions properly so-called—initiate wage-earners step by step into administrative methods and economic life. We may add that the unions have taken an active part in the propaganda against intemperance, notably by the prohibition of the sale of alcoholic drinks in their club-rooms. They have put in claims for technical schools, and have sometimes contributed towards their establishment.

We shall not emphasise here the difference in the several aspirations of unions belonging to different political parties, but we do affirm that, practically, these divergencies tend decidedly to diminish. They are disappearing gradually under the influence of analogous circumstances, community of interests, and identity of the resultant practical object.

Political sectarianism tends to grow weaker. The specialised trade unions conceive the conflict between classes in a much less revolutionary spirit than hitherto. The Catholics, on their side, are giving up more and more the system of mixed unions composed of masters and workmen, and are becoming more partial, like the Socialists, to unions composed exclusively of wage-earners occupied with defending the interests of their class.

The friendly societies and the unions have for some time been drawing closer to each other. They have been amalgamating into associations on a unique plan, termed *syndicats à base multiple*, pursuing the double object of mutual aid and of struggling for better conditions of work.

The membership of the different groups is becoming more stable in proportion to the increased rate of subscriptions. The dissipation of their strength is reduced by the constitution of federations, and by the amalgamation of groups of the same district belonging to one and the same trade.

Space fails me to inquire into the scope of activity of the unions. This resolves itself mainly into organisation of unions, efforts for better conditions of labour, mutual aid, intervention of public authority, and education.

As to the specific character of each union, some are political, others professional. The political federations are either Socialist or Catholic, not to mention the federation of Liberal unions, which has no vitality. As to the trade federations, they do not always keep aloof from politics. The neutral and socialist unions foregather in one and the same trade federations. The Catholics,

on the other hand, keep more to themselves and have their own federations. They have a common organ for centralising the unionist movement, and that is, the general secretarial board of Christian trade unions. This has been in action since 1904. Non-Catholic labour associations have also their central organism, viz., the Trade Union Council (*Commission Syndicale*). This is less recent, having been instituted at the Labour Congress of Verviers in 1898. It works under the control of the Labour party, but does not exclude neutral unions, the greater part of whose members belong as individuals to the Labour party. Others among them profess anarchist opinions, especially among the bakers and goldsmiths.

The mission of the Trade Union Council comprises the study of the questions in which the trade union movement is concerned, such as the formation of unions, the organisation of inquiries, the drafting of legal measures, moral intervention in strikes, and the organisation of relief for strikers. Apart from the Socialist associations, several large neutral unions have adhered to the Trade Union Council, such as the *Fédération du Livre*, the Glass-blowers' Union, and the Glovers' Union. The Council founded in 1904 a monthly periodical, the *Journal des Correspondances*, which serves as the official organ of the unions affiliated to the Council.

The Council takes an active part in organising the annual Trade Union Congress. At the last of these, it undertook a statistical inquiry into the situation of Belgian trade unions. Unfortunately, it has not yet received sufficient support from corresponding unions to enable it to complete its task.

The international relations of the unionists of Belgium have developed, and are to-day more frequent and far more of a professional character than in the days of the International. The leading unions in Belgium are affiliated to International federations, or, at least, in continuous relations with them. The metal-workers, miners, typographers, textile workers, tobacco workers, those employed in objects of art, and the lightermen—all these are so many labour groups standing in touch with the international world of trade unionism.

Such, briefly sketched, is the situation at the present hour of trade unions in Belgium.¹

LAURENT DECHESNE
Liège.

¹ A more complete account will be found in my monograph: *Syndicats ouvriers belges*. Paris: Larose. P. 120.