Chapter 5

The Belgian trade union organisations: national divisions and common European action

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1. Introduction

Belgium is a broadly pro-European country with little obvious Euroscepticism, and only rarely is any strong or recurrent criticism heard in this regard. The Belgian trade union organisations are, on the whole, no exception. While they have, on occasions, mobilised around European processes calling for a social Europe and critically denouncing the region’s ‘liberal shift’ since the 1980s, their support for the European project has never been fundamentally questioned.

The same can be said of their support for European trade unionism. Since the establishment of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) in 1973, and its first expansion in 1974, the Belgian organisations have represented a reliable and constructive partner in the search for solutions. While building on their significant weight in national industrial relations, the Belgian trade unions have placed themselves firmly within a supranational logic. Their support for the ETUC’s development has been unwavering, although they have not been immune to conflicts over process or content. At the same time, they have continued to develop a logic of bilateral cooperation with organisations in France, Germany and Benelux, albeit within that same European framework, and this has also contributed to the construction of European trade unionism.

More recently, since 2004 the Belgian organisations have been working in close and active cooperation with the ETUC in relation to the widespread protests against the Bolkestein Directive. In other situations, the Belgian unions have robustly criticised the ETUC for its structural weaknesses in terms of human and financial resources. This was particularly the case in 1991 during a significant reform
of the organisation, as will be seen later in this chapter. Overwhelmingly clear, however, is the important role that a number of advantages have enabled the Belgian unions to play, both now and in the past. This will be the first point to be developed in more detail (Section 2). We then continue chronologically, highlighting the existence of two broad periods, and analyse how the Belgian unions welcomed, supported and accompanied the ETUC’s first steps, despite a context of severe inter-organisational tensions at national level. A third point will briefly consider some of what we consider to be the most emblematic issues, and which are revealing of the relationship between Belgian trade unionism and Europe generally (including European trade unionism). The cases of Solidarność in the early 1980s, the Renault Vilvoorde affair of 1996, the Doorn group and, more recently, the Bolkestein Directive will all be considered. Finally, the Belgian trade unions’ position with regard to the 2007 crisis, its consequences and remedies will draw this overview of a rich and eventful history to a close. This common history has been woven, not without conflicts, by drawing together several major threads that unite the Belgian trade unions around the European project. This includes their close cooperation at the European level despite numerous differences nationally.

2. **Strengths and assets at the heart of Europe**

Located at the heart of Europe, physically close to the structures of European trade unionism, this central position within the European family gives the Belgian organisations a number of advantages. In no particular order for the moment, we can mention such factors as geographical proximity, linguistic knowledge (a number of the leaders speak both French and English, two active languages of the European Union) and the presence of numerous longstanding immigrant communities in the country (Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Polish, Greeks and so on). This last point encourages a more subtle and nuanced consideration of what is a fundamental and underlying issue, namely European cultural diversity. Immigrant activists now play a significant role in the Belgian trade union movement, enabling structural relationships to be forged with organisations in their countries of origin and thus contributing to the construction of a European trade unionism on a social level. Specific structures devoted to immigration-related issues began to take shape both within the **Fédération générale des travailleurs de Belgique** (General Federation of Belgian Workers/FGTB) and the **Confédération générale des syndicats chrétiens** (General Confederation of Christian Unions/CSC) from the 1960s on, and these contributed to this dynamic and laid the basis for the participation of representatives from these communities in the decision-making processes.

As with member states politically and institutionally, the Belgian trade unions have shown the important role that ‘small’ and ‘medium’ entities can play in the process of European integration.¹ Insofar as the different actions and protests of the European social movement often start in the Belgian and European capital, the FGTB and the CSC are often at the forefront of organising such European demonstrations and themselves mobilising around

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¹ While it should be recalled that the notion of ‘small state’ does not exist in law, we would mention the fact that Jean-Claude Juncker, then Prime Minister of Luxembourg, emphasised, somewhat wryly, in an interview with the Belgian newspaper *La Libre Belgique* on 12 December 2001: ‘There are only two large countries in the Union: Great Britain and the Grand Duchy. The others have taken the linguistic precaution of not insisting on their size.’
the same issues. This mobilisation, which comes almost naturally at the European level, sometimes results in a certain dissatisfaction regarding the financial and human investment it requires.2

One of the strengths of Belgian trade unionism lies in the country’s high unionisation rate, a knock-on effect from the Nordic countries,3 and on a heavily institutionalised and composite mass unionism (Pigenet et al. 2005: 169). One feature common to all Belgian organisations is the existence of a long tradition of trade union pluralism within a political system defined since the 1970s as ‘polarised multipartism’ (Sartori 1976). The Belgian trade union world is divided by deep ideological differences. There are three cross-sectoral labour bodies in Belgium: the FGTB, the CSC and the Confédération générale des syndicats libéraux de Belgique (General Confederation of Free Belgian Unions/CGSLB).4 They are based in the north and south of the country, without any real national convergence and they represent different forms of unionism, subject to strong ideological influence. They are in many ways reminiscent of the differences that exist between the trade union worlds of northern and southern Europe. Unions in the Walloon region, in the south of the country, for example, have a tradition of protest in which the number of demonstrators is a key factor in the symbolic success of the action. This is generally associated with unions in the Latin countries and is less widespread in the countries of northern Europe.

The divisions between the Belgian unions are thus deep and are reflected particularly in their different ways of pursuing economic and social policies on employment or regional development, for example, and in the need to cooperate (or not) with the employers and government of the day.

In the south of the country, the dominant historical trait is the long presence of a primarily socialist and anti-establishment union movement that finds its references in the union culture of southern Europe. The situation is quite different in the north of the country, in Flanders, where a more ‘proactive’ and ‘cooperative’ form of Christian unionism, more akin to northern Europe, predominates. From this perspective, Christian unionism is closer to the German system, which prioritises cooperation between the social partners and a search for compromise, while not, however, ruling out confrontation (Rehfeldt 2005). These broad trends do not prevent the unions from continuing as national and unitary organisations, with regional wings. This is all the more important given that many issues continue to be dealt with at the federal level (labour law, collective bargaining agreements, social security, for example) and are thus negotiated nationally. The continued existence of national organisations does not, however, negate the existence of tensions between the Walloons and the Flemish, and this was particularly the case during the 1970s.

In general terms, Christian unionism emerged as the main force in the country at the end of the 1950s and was able to rely on the indisputable support of the Christian workers’ movement and its youth and women’s organisations, along with the Christian mutual societies, all united under a single umbrella (Mampuys 1994: 317 ff). This created a unique situation given that the Christian unions were disappearing in neighbouring countries, such as Germany from 1933 on and the Netherlands in 1981 (Goddeiris 2010: 243). They have,

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2. Interview with Thierry Dock (CSC), Brussels, 23 September 2013.
4. For more information on this latter, which is less well known as it is in a minority in the Belgian union environment, see Faniel and Vandaele (2011).
however, continued to exist in Italy, France, Switzerland and Austria, in these cases not as autonomous organisations but rather as stakeholders in a wider union movement (Pasture 1999: 410).

The socialist-inspired union trend, fundamentally reformist in nature, became established at the end of the nineteenth century within the Parti Ouvrier Belge (Belgian Workers Party). The FGTB emerged in its current form in April 1945 following a merger between various tendencies, resulting in a split with its highly powerful communist wing and closer ties with the Socialist Party post-Second World War. This created tensions with the wing embodied by André Renard, which wanted a union independent from its sister party (Tilly 2005). The FGTB has a longstanding relationship with the French unions, facilitated by a common language and the similarities in their union cultures. This is also the case with the Italian unions, however, particularly CGIL and UIL. A founding member of the ETUC in 1973, the FGTB has engaged in a significant amount of international action since the 1950s, particularly via European integration and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) more broadly.

As for the free union movement, although established in 1899 at Gand some years after the Parti Ouvrier Libéral (Liberal Workers Party) was formed, it has long been the ‘Tom Thumb’ of Belgian unions, its difference marked by its desire to defend a programme of class cooperation or even worker participation in company profits. It is not insignificant, however, and stands as an exception among the different countries studied as there is no such powerful liberal trend in either the Netherlands or Luxembourg, to name two of the countries closest to Belgium.

The dominance of Christian unionism in Belgium, in terms of paid up members, was real and guaranteed during the 1960s and can be explained by structural factors that enabled it to ensure its supremacy, such as the Walloon Region’s industrial decline during the 1960s, structural changes in employment that led to an expansion of the service sector, the development of a non-profit sector in which Christian unionism had a strong presence and a unionisation rate higher in Flanders than in Wallonia (Van Kerkhoven 1986). Belgian unionism is also highly institutionalised, being closely linked to the country’s socio-economic administration. Due to its institutional recognition, which has in particular enabled it to play a central role in the administration of unemployment benefits, it has been able to develop a wide range of services for its members and has thus been able to draw on broad representation across companies and sectors.

Finally, we need to seek an explanation for the strength of the Belgian unions (along with the Nordic countries) in Europe, in terms of membership and rate of coverage of collective bargaining agreements. Two important dimensions need to be considered. First, its grassroots organising must be mentioned, thanks to a clear and guaranteed presence on the ground (Van Gyes 2009: 52). Second, its historical roots, which have enabled it to play the role of counterbalance in an original way that combines political mobilisation and, it may be, strike action with efforts aimed at consulting with other actors due to the Belgians’ well-known desire for compromise. Despite their differences and divisions, the trade unions often present joint demands on issues that are of primary concern to workers, such as wages or working conditions, and this demonstrates the strength of their pragmatism.

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5. For further consideration of the history of Belgian unionism, see Tilly (2005).
3. The Belgian organisations in the early days of the ETUC: positions and tensions

Within a historical spectrum that dates from 1973 to the present day, it seems relevant to distinguish between two broad periods that characterise the relationship between the Belgian trade union confederations and the ETUC. They initially (1973–1991) participated with conviction, in line with their previous commitment dating from the 1950s. While not free from criticism and questioning, this European engagement was based on a shared project among the Benelux unions aimed at building a European trade union movement capable of federating its members and bringing weight to bear on the European institutions in order to strengthen workers’ rights. Over the course of the second period, from 1991 onwards, differences of opinion and approach – already present but hitherto bubbling underneath the surface – emerged and coincided with a greater detachment on the part of the Belgian unions, which adopted an attitude that could be described as more pragmatic and less prescriptive.

It has to be noted that Belgian (and the other founder countries’) involvement in developing a European trade union movement clearly predates the emergence of the ETUC. In fact, it was based on a longstanding community dynamic, passed down from generation to generation since the 1950s following the founding of the ECSC in 1951. Paul Finet, former General Secretary of the FGTB, was a member of the High Authority from 1952 on, chairing it in 1958. We could go even further back, to the end of the Second World War, with the experiment that was the birth of Benelux in 1944 around a customs union that came into force in 1948 (Poisdevin 1986). This was accompanied by union cooperation between the three founding member states of this organisation (Belgium, Luxembourg and Netherlands), based on the strategy of a common front in the face of the impact of the Cold War, one that was to prove beneficial in relation to Benelux’s planned economic union (Grosbois 1998: 357). This strategy had a number of effects in the 1950s, with the formation of a special Benelux Commission prior to the creation of a Consultative Economic and Social Council via the Benelux Treaty of Economic Union of 3 February 1958 (Van Klaveren 1990). These were consultative bodies in which the unions were involved. While greater union integration was theoretically the result of the Benelux experience, this was hardly the reality in the long term.6

Moreover, the FGTB and the CSC were both active members7 of their international organisation’s regional groupings. August Cool of the CSC was, moreover, one of the main architects behind the transformation of the IFCTU and the establishment of a regional European organisation to react to and take a position on the Treaty of Rome and its consequences (Pasture 1999: 280). On retiring from the presidency of the European Organisation of the World Confederation of Labour, which succeeded IFCTU (EO/WCL), he was replaced by his successor at the head of the CSC, Jef Houthusys. Before focusing on the place of the Belgian unions within the ETUC, it should be noted that we will here look only at the CSC and the FGTB. The liberal union, which only joined the ETUC in 2002, will not be considered (Faniel and Vandaele 2011: 47).

6. Benelux evolved as the coming together of Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg during 1944, around a customs union policy that came into force in 1948. See particularly Poidevin (1986).
7. Not forgetting the active role played by André Renard, see Tilly (2005).
3.1. **CSC**

A Christian organisation and pillar of the WCL, the CSC was not one of the founding members of the ETUC, which it joined during its first enlargement in 1974. Approved by the CSC’s Board with a comfortable majority (177 for, 44 against and 10 abstentions), this decision did nonetheless give rise to a great deal of debate. The fear of being sidelined within an organisation that contained a clear majority of socialist unions was a real one. Moreover, the CSC would really have liked to maintain its freedom of choice in terms of international affiliation. Furthermore, the advisability or not of joining the ETUC needed to be seen in light of a national consideration: a fear of FGTB expansionism and its desire to unify the Belgian trade union movement. In this spirit, several people feared that European unification would merely be the prelude to an annexation of the CSC by the FGTB nationally. Under the impetus of its president, Jef Houthuys, and its general secretary, Robert D’Hondt, the CSC did nonetheless vote in favour of joining the ETUC, not before repeating that it would not abandon its founding values and that this decision would have no impact on the Belgian union movement. This decision was ultimately motivated by three reasons: (i) the ‘long experience of union cooperation [between International Confederation of Free Trade Union/ICFTU and WCL organisations] at European level’; (ii) ‘European enlargement’ and the new challenges emerging at a time when an Economic and Monetary Union was being considered; and (iii) the appearance and development of ever more numerous ‘multinational dinosaurs in Europe’ and of ‘big capital’, in relation to which union unification was necessary to achieve an essential critical mass in the balance of power (CSC 1975: 447-449).

Once a member of the ETUC, the CSC was to forcefully and repeatedly advocate for better integration of the professional trade unions within the European confederation and then for strengthening the union committees, which needed more space within the ETUC. It also called for a stronger and more effective ETUC with the means to act and become a true European trade union organisation. One of the striking features of the early years of the enlarged ETUC was the persistent divisions between Christians and socialists. These took several forms and were vigorously denounced by Jef Houthuys, who became de facto spokesperson and representative of the Christian tendency within the ETUC.

One initial point of tension concerned their differential treatment with regard to membership issues. The CSC supported the membership of a Spanish member organisation of the WCL, USO. Several other members of the ETUC, such as LO Denmark and the FGTB, did not consider this organisation sufficiently representative to justify its membership. After years of underlying tension in this regard, Houthuys therefore likewise did not support the decision to allow UGT Portugal to join. It was, in his view, no more representative than USO. He walked out of the ETUC’s executive committee meeting of 10 February 1983 in protest at what was, in his opinion, differential treatment and clear discrimination against a WCL organisation.

A second problem perceived by the CSC was its exclusion, along with other WCL member organisations, from the ETUC’s different structures or similar bodies, such as the union committees and interregional councils, and particularly the SaarlórLux committee.

One member of the CFDT, moreover, explained to a CSC colleague that, in his opinion, ‘opposition to your membership is far more political than geographic’. Houthuys was quick to make his grievances known to the General Secretary of the ETUC. One member of the CSC’s executive felt that some ETUC members, affiliated to ICFTU, were also doing all they could to exclude Christian organisations from some of the ETUC’s working groups.

Finally, Houthuys often voiced his opposition to meetings between the ETUC and socialist MEPs. He firmly suggested that the ETUC should not be politically exclusive and should be open to meeting other MEPs ‘friendly to the workers’ movement’, such as those within the European People’s Party (EPP) in particular.

Despite these issues, the CSC wanted to appear and be a loyal partner and member of the ETUC, participating actively in its work, from the executive committee down to the different working groups. The divisions between Christian and socialist unions, while far from paralysing its overall work, did remain a marked reality throughout the ETUC’s early years, at least from the CSC’s point of view. Despite its weaknesses, however, the ETUC of the mid-1980s appeared to represent a renewal of European trade unionism and the only valid opportunity for Christian trade unionism to exert any influence over the Community space in favour of workers. In any case, these internal divisions within the ETUC, linked to historical and ideological factors, had ceased to exist by the early 1990s.

3.2. FGTB

A founding member of the ETUC, the FGTB was also required to take a position on the ETUC membership (and enlargement) process, something that proved rather conflictual. It was, in any case, an opportunity for its general secretary, Georges Debunne, to repeat his surprise and incomprehension at a union (the CSC) that defends European unity – for him because it ‘represented almost nothing’ at this level – while advocating national and global pluralism.

This observation seemed to be a real obsession for Debunne, to the extent that he raised the issue of the Christian organisations’ membership at virtually every meeting. He was to vehemently demand, moreover, that the ETUC be expanded to incorporate the communist organisations at the same time as it welcomed those of the WCL. Faced with a contrasting reality, he did not vote on the CSC’s membership. As with the CSC, the fact that the two Belgian union confederations both belonged to the ETUC did not defuse these tensions. The ETUC was even exploited for the purpose of these clashes. A proposal was thus made to the FGTB’s executive that the ETUC should organise the necessary aid to Portugal, in order to pull the rug from under their feet and ‘neutralise the CSC’, which was trying to become involved in Portugal.

In terms of positioning, the FGTB followed the path espoused by the ETUC by calling, at its Congress in November 1978, for an end to soft and subservient action towards the European institutions and for more robust European resistance from the trade unions.

When he became president of the ETUC, four years later, a disillusioned Debunne noted, however, that the ETUC’s ambitious programme, set out in London in 1978, had hardly been a success and had been incapable of ‘achieving the desired turnaround’ (ETUC 1982: 258). During his inaugural speech, Debunne painted a grim picture of the Community situation, with high unemployment and the crisis hitting the weakest while the institutions continued to operate with little democracy. He recalled that ‘passing resolutions’ was not enough and that struggle was inherent in the union movement. In the current situation, he said, this was the only way of ‘redressing the situation and achieving the social Europe that we all want’ (ETUC 1982: 262).

3.3. Firm but ever more critical support

Throughout the whole 1973–1991 period, the Belgian confederations – like their Dutch and Luxembourg counterparts – supported the aim of a strong ETUC endowed with the resources needed to back up its action. Since it was founded, the FGTB had been calling for increased contributions and, above all, the incorporation of the European Trade Union Committees, which it considered essential for the ETUC’s functioning. The relationship between these committees and the confederation was a delicate one given their desire for independence and their relationships with their international counterparts (Gobin 1996: 546-554). Moreover, they did not all represent the same number of countries.

The ETUC’s reform, which began in 1991 (Gobin 1991), was in response to a demand from the Belgian unions for a stronger ETUC that would include the European Trade Union Committees and the Interregional Trade Union Councils (IRTUC) and pursue a trade unionism based on action. In fact, since its creation, the ETUC had been increasingly perceived as a lobbying organisation. The FGTB thus made a number of criticisms in this regard:15 the secretariat was trapped within this logic and relying too much on the goodwill of the European Commission.16 It accused the ETUC of being an organisation that had moved only in this direction for far too long. It called on it to change its direction and its methods. Strikes, protests and demonstrations of strength should also form part of the panoply of actions initiated by the ETUC. At the end of 1992, a day of European Action on the part of railway workers, with a strike in some countries, marked out the path to be followed. The general action of 2 April 1993, which brought a million people together in different gatherings, demonstrations and work stoppages across Europe, was another step in that direction. The FGTB and the CSC even organised a demonstration with their German and Dutch colleagues in Maastricht, a location of symbolic importance.

The CSC (which subscribes to restricted decision-making) adopted a more moderate position in this debate on ETUC reform. It encouraged a no less substantial increase in contributions, however, advocating their doubling.

The results of the internal transformation of the ETUC, commenced following the Stekelenburg report (the report coordinator was a member of the Dutch FNV), were not wholly satisfactory to some of the Benelux organisations, and this was important to the Belgian trade unions as they regularly cooperated with their neighbours. The FGTB felt

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that the improvements were ‘insufficient’. This opinion established a dividing line that became increasingly demarcated between those who wanted European trade unionism to act as a protest movement and those who wanted it to concentrate on lobbying. The first camp included the FGTB and OGBL and, to a lesser extent, the CSC.**17** For the FGTB, their autonomous national-level union policy was increasingly finding itself up against European limitations (competitiveness, budgetary standards). The disagreements focused not only on the ETUC’s method of action but also on its position in relation to the EEC in general and the Maastricht process in particular. The FGTB and the CSC felt that the ETUC’s attitude towards Great Britain’s refusal to sign the Social Charter (part of the Maastricht Treaty) was overly naive. It seemed to consider it ‘the lesser evil’, the main thing being the inclusion of the Charter in the Treaty, while the Belgian organisations were more critical of the ‘clause that enabled the United Kingdom to opt out of social Europe, thus creating the conditions for organised social dumping’.*18* Moreover, the Belgian organisations denounced the lack of European political democracy, something that was not resolved with Maastricht. Some progress was nonetheless made with regard to social dialogue and this was favourably received by the Belgian unions. The possibility of signing European agreements, resulting primarily from the European Directive of September 1994 and enabling the formation of European works councils, was particularly welcomed by the Benelux organisations. These European works councils were considered, at least initially, as a victory in the context of demands for economic democracy. They represented progress insofar as they established, on paper at least, a right to information and communication that would enable workers and unions to organise as a consequence (Gobin 2004). Belgium was to be the first member state to transpose this Directive into law.

This real progress was insufficient to mitigate the split between some confederations and the ETUC. This was particularly the case with the FGTB and this division was to manifest itself in various ways. This came in the form of direct criticism when the Belgian socialist union denounced the ETUC’s ‘highly watered down list of demands’**19** presented at its 1995 Congress. This could be interpreted as a refusal to toe a line that was judged lacking in any force but also as a mark of the difficulty in reaching agreements due to the continuing enlargement of the ETUC and the inclusion of unions from the countries of central and eastern Europe. The open conflict between the FGTB and the ETUC reached no conclusion in 1995 and the situation deteriorated over the course of different congresses to the point where the FGTB decided, exceptionally, not to participate in the 2003 Congress in Prague by way of protest. For Corinne Gobin, the reasons for this refusal, both formal and informal (Gobin 2004), lay in the failure to respect a pre-agreement between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg that would enable the Belgian confederation to obtain a post in the secretariat. This failure meant that the FGTB obtained no such post. Other factors certainly played a role in this complex situation, however, which has finally ended on a positive note in more recent years, with the FGTB reinvesting in the ETUC in a clearly less conflictual manner.

Although in relative agreement with the political positions of the FGTB regarding the running of the ETUC, the CSC did participate in the Prague Congress where it alone

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17. ETUC, Rapport Stekelenburg, op. cit.
supported the amendments that had been proposed jointly by the two Belgian organisations. While analyses and opinions differ as to the underlying reasons for this boycott, a conflict around the nomination (not endorsed in the end) of a Belgian candidate from the FGTB to the secretariat contributed significantly.

4. Some key examples at the heart of the relationship with the ETUC

4.1. Solidarność: Belgium at the forefront of the solidarity movement

‘The strike is at an end, we go back to work on 1 September...’ On 31 August 1980, a serious voice resounded through the immense conference hall at the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, the large Polish port. It announced the end of a tough battle that had lasted 18 days on the part of the 17,000 shipyard workers. The strike that started in the Gdansk shipyards led to the birth of a free trade union under the leadership of a young electrician who was to go down in history, Lech Walesa.

Belgium was one of the most vocal supporters of the Polish Solidarność movement, both its unions and other social organisations, who all mobilised their members in support of this democratic struggle. The Christian union was particularly involved in this while the FGTB, although not against Solidarność, did not consider it a priority (Goddeeris 2010: 243). Belgium’s domestic situation and the difficult relations between the CSC leaders and those of the socialist union does, of course, need to be taken into consideration. This being the case, the role of Polish exiles was crucial in the solidarity movement that was to develop post-1980 in Belgium.

The CSC, which was able to draw on the support of the WCL and its general secretary, Jan Kulakowski, himself Polish, and which cooperated closely with the Dutch union, CNV, in this matter, not only provided material support by means of humanitarian convoys but also developed a strategy, created a special commission and sent an official delegation to Poland. The regional inter-professional federations, the professional trade unions and the local union branches of the Christian union launched a special campaign for Poland and the Solidarność movement once martial law was established in December 1981. In fact, the Polish situation fitted well with the plans of the Christian union movement and its ideological directions. The support for a mass trade union with a Christian identity, defending the interests of workers in a socialist society, could but legitimise the role of the Christian union movement as a whole. For its part, the FTGB relied on ICFTU and preferred to focus particularly on supporting the British miners in the struggle against the neoliberal policies of the Thatcher government.

In 1979, at its congress in Munich, the ETUC encouraged its members to increase their national action with the aim of pushing forward its programme of demands. The executive committee of 29 and 30 November that same year had to face the facts, given that a European employment week was under way. The EEC’s Council of Social Affairs Ministers, which had just met, did not agree to a better distribution of available work as a priority action for employment. And yet the FGTB had been campaigning for reduced working hours for years as a solution to the employment crisis. It faced opposition from the German

unions, however, aimed at reducing working hours to 36 from 1984 onwards. The Benelux unions were also campaigning for a democratisation of the economy and greater political democracy within Europe. With regard to this last point, it was in their opinion essential that the European Parliament be elected by universal suffrage and given more power. Finally, it was also a question of giving the union movement space within the Community institutions which, for the moment, it felt it did not have.

4.2. The closure of Renault Vilvoorde

Between 1993 and 1997, the relocation of Grundig’s and Hoover’s operations was announced, followed by the resounding news of Renault Vilvoorde’s closure in Belgium, events that all marked a significant failure for social Europe. The closure of Renault Vilvoorde, announced in February 1997 in order to rationalise the group’s European production, sent a veritable tremor throughout the country’s social and economic landscape because this company was employing 3,098 people, 2,635 blue-collar and 463 white-collar workers. At the request of Renault’s board of directors, an expert was appointed to study the alternatives to closing Vilvoorde put forward by the European group’s works committee, based on reduced working hours across all sites.21 The search for alternative solutions (essentially through reduced working time) was one of the major challenges for the works committee, and particularly for the CFDT. The aim was to exploit the outcry created by the Vilvoorde affair in order to build European solidarity, although this did not get very far in practice.22 The other French trade union organisations were not particularly favourable to reducing working hours across all Renault sites and the Spanish unions already had an agreement with the company to save jobs in Spain. As for the Belgians, they chose to negotiate a social plan. In short, there was still no real sign of a concerted union response emanating from the European level. This being the case, nationally, the Belgian government called on the National Labour Council (Conseil National du Travail/CNT) to give an opinion on the effectiveness of information and consultation procedures. The CNT proposed creating a link between the employer’s requirement to inform and consult staff and the individual redundancies that occur when a mass lay-off is implemented. This opinion resulted in a law, adopted in 1998 and commonly known as the ‘Renault law’. Union leaders were highly sceptical of the effectiveness of this law. For Marc Deschrijver (FGTB/white-collar workers), “The Renault law only serves to occupy the workers by forcing them to participate in “consultations” and “information meetings”’. At the end of the day, all the jobs were lost anyway.23 And when the Ford Genk site closed 15 years later, Marc Leemans, president of the CSC, emphasised that his organisation considered Europe to be responsible for the closure. The proof, he explained, lay in the fact that Ford Genk had not only relocated to Spain but also to Germany where wage costs were higher.24 For Marc Leemans, ‘The real reason is not really the cost of labour.’ The problem was that Europe and its political leaders had agreed to harmonise Europe in economic and

22. Idem.
free trade terms ‘but without harmonising social and fiscal matters’. This had created ‘wide disparities between member states, which multinationals are aware of and are exploiting’. This was ‘a handicap’ for our country.

4.3. The Doorn group as a stepping stone towards European-level wage negotiations?

For the Belgian unions, the information networks established through the Doorn group enabled quicker reactions within the context of social dialogue around certain employer demands. The Doorn group was born of an initiative of the Belgian unions. The law of 26 July 1996 on promoting employment and safeguarding competitiveness limited increases in Belgian wages, which were prevented from rising faster than those of its three major bordering countries. This pushed the Belgian unions to seek better coordination with their cross-border counterparts. The initiative led to international coordination of the sectoral dialogue, which the European works committees helped to strengthen in some cases. Linking the Dutch and German unions initially, the dynamic of the Doorn group – thus named because of the media coverage of a meeting held in that town – also included Luxembourg from 1998 on, and France from 2002 (Dufresne 2009).

This initiative owed much to the Belgian 1996 law on competitiveness and competition, which required wage performance to be compared with neighbouring countries (France, Germany, Netherlands, Luxembourg) and aligned in consequence. In September 1998, this new group, made up of inter-branch and sectoral representatives, published a declaration setting out its objectives (Fajertag 2000: 89). One of these was to launch a political offensive of joint demands aimed at combating social and wage dumping through an ongoing exchange of information and the adoption of a joint approach. This was the first time that confederations from a number of different countries had established a common direction with regard to wages (Fajertag 2000: 71). Despite the initial joint declarations, numerous meetings proved necessary before a decision could be taken. Even between confederations from economically close countries, the disparities often remained difficult to overcome. The ETUC nonetheless followed closely on the heels of this group, which was not formally a part of its structure but which it took as a point of reference. It established a Committee for the Coordination of Collective Bargaining (CCNC) in November 1999. In 2001, Doorn group cooperation extended into the area of non-wage demands during a conference on 6 and 7 September. The aim from then on was to fight all aspects of wage competition and to work to achieve the right to lifelong training. In September 2002, a strategy of benchmarking of working time and working time policy was accompanied by a desire to develop cross-border action around collective labour agreements focusing on pensions.

4.4. Pitting European workers against each other only creates misery

During a Benelux social summit on 13 February 2014, the unions from the three countries (LCGB, OGBL, FNV, CNV, MHP, FGTB, CSC and CGSLB) that make up this European organisation called on the heads of government to tackle social dumping and unfair competition between national workers and posted workers. The FGTB insisted, for example, as did the ETUC and numerous union confederations, on the need to forge a new path for Europe
aimed at combating social dumping. Realities unacceptable to the unions were denounced, such as posted Romanian lorry drivers working for Belgian companies and being paid EUR 200 a month when the sector had lost 4,000 jobs in four years. The case of Bulgarian construction workers paid EUR 6 per hour instead of EUR 15 when the sector in Belgium had lost 7,000 jobs was also conspicuous. Postings, temporary staff, sub-contractors, bogus self-employment, social fraud; all were being used to reduce wages, claimed the Belgian unions. Solutions could be found everywhere. During its federal committee of 27 February 2014, the FGTB highlighted the importance of including sectoral concerns and monitoring them through the European trade union confederations, along with democratic control of the way in which the European investment plan was being managed. The need for solidarity between member states was also considered essential: this plan had to support the countries and regions most affected by the crisis and unemployment.

In terms of the problems raised by the Directive on Posted Workers, the different unions in Benelux supported all the initiatives taken against social dumping. “We also support all measures aimed at better coordination of monitoring activities, without which neither the “posted workers” Directive nor the “implementing” Directive will be able to achieve the objective of putting an end to worker exploitation and social dumping.” In July 2014, the socialist transport union, the BTB-UBOT, gave the Belgian authorities the names of 85 companies which, through subsidiaries established in eastern Europe countries, were apparently recruiting drivers on a wage clearly lower than the Belgian minimum wage.25

As a concrete solution, the unions called for the establishment of a ‘social Europe’, namely a body of civil servants authorised to pursue abuses of worker postings across the national borders of a member state. Current good practice within the Benelux member states, which have long had problems related to worker mobility, could serve as an inspiration for the European Union as a whole.

4.5. Against the Bolkestein Directive

The question of service liberalisation in the context of the WTO (General Agreement on Trade in Services) mobilised a series of social actors in Belgium, including the unions, at the start of the 2000s. When John Monks, from the United Kingdom, was elected general secretary in 2003, the Bolkestein Directive became a new issue around which all of the trade union organisations could mobilise in particular. This Directive was named after the Dutch Internal Market Commissioner and aimed at ‘liberalising’ services within the European Union (Crespy and Petithomme 2010). The text was intended to stimulate growth and European competitiveness. From January 2004 on, the Belgian unions raised an early warning via a campaign entitled ‘Stop Bolkestein’, which served as a stimulus for European mobilisation aimed at challenging a number of the provisions of this proposed directive. This related particularly to its very wide field of application, including a large number of general interest services, and also the principle of country of origin, by which a company would be able to provide a service in another member state under the law of its country of origin (Crespy and Petithomme 2010: 157). Their French and German colleagues joined this protest movement, which then rallied numerous political parties, while the TUC and sectoral federations

warned the ETUC that there was something in the pipeline although they did not know quite what.26 In these different countries, the trade union organisations and other associations active in the political field, such as Attac, women’s organisations, environmental organisations or those campaigning for development cooperation, formed a common front against this Directive. They feared that companies domiciled in states with high levels of social regulation would relocate their offices to countries where such regulation was more lax. The major fear was of a general lowering of social standards across Europe.

In Belgium, the conflict between the unions and the European Commission turned sour when Fritz Bolkestein’s spokesperson described an FGTB publication criticising the Directive as ‘a racist rag worthy of the National Front’ (Crespy 2010: 161). The Commissioner issued an apology. Meanwhile, the Belgian unions were able to make the most of their effective links within the federal government, Belgian diplomacy and the European bodies, particularly the European Parliament, during the long stage of the reading of the draft directive in Parliament. In June 2004, on the eve of the European elections, an initial European demonstration took place. The Belgian unions also strongly supported two European demonstrations in March 2005 and February 2006. Their victory, based particularly on their work behind the scenes with MEPs and a show of force in demonstrations, especially in Strasbourg during the parliamentary vote, gave a positive feel back to the ETUC’s lobbying work and demonstrated that this latter could combine such work with action of a more direct nature. Through their contacts with MEPs, the FGTB and CSC, in harmony with the ETUC, were able to influence the process at strategic moments such as the first and second readings of the draft directive in the European Parliament (Crespy and Petithomme 2010: 162).

5. A firmly proactive approach to the 2007 crisis

With the onset of the sovereign debt crisis, which hit Greece first at the end of 2009/beginning of 2010, the theme of European economic governance, and in particular the euro zone, suddenly became an issue of the utmost importance. This crisis was perceived as revealing weaknesses in the coordination of the economic policies of the euro zone, the very existence of which could be compromised. The idea of the Lisbon Agenda was ambitious but, after the 2005 review, the adoption of an ultraliberal approach triumphed. This perhaps coincided with and contributed to an increased feeling of disillusionment towards Europe. Claude Rolin (CSC Belgium) thus considered that the return of a new neoliberal flagship should have been prevented with a strategy conducted by Ecofin alone. The ministers of labour should also have been involved.27 For the Belgian trade unions, as Anne Demelenne (FGTB Belgium) noted during the ETUC’s executive committee of February 2010, the context marked by the restructuring of the Opel and INBEV groups occurred not because of a lack of flexibility or productivity. These restructurings, on the contrary, revealed the failure of the industrial choices made by companies and governments.28

26. Interview with Jozef Niemec, 26 March 2013, Brussels.
27. AETUC, compte rendu de la réunion du comité exécutif du 23 février 2010.
Also in 2010, the European Union set a new mid-term strategy: the Europe 2020 strategy. This established that each member state had to produce an annual national reform programme focused on achieving these objectives, with the first year’s programme to be produced by spring 2011. A Belgian Europe 2020 platform – formed of the main Belgian unions, environmental movements, the North–South movement and poverty networks – was launched with the aim of sending a series of signals to the different Belgian political leaders, enshrined in a joint text entitled ‘Europe must also be social and environmental’. In any case, the internal market needed a legal framework and policies capable of protecting the social model, in line with the Lisbon Treaty. For the CGSLB, this was a question primarily of:

— implementing the horizontal social clauses included in the Treaty and reviewing Directives that threatened fundamental workers’ rights and created social dumping within the Union itself: posted workers, working time;
— promoting decent work and fighting wage competition between member states via the idea of a minimum wage and upward harmonisation of social and employment standards;
— agreeing a clear legal framework that protects public and private social services of general interest, along with health care in Europe;
— getting the European Union to join the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in order to make possible an alignment of the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, aimed at achieving a healthier balance between fundamental social rights and economic freedoms.

Against the dramatic backdrop of the ongoing crisis, and following a successful European demonstration on 29 September in Brussels, the FGTB, CSC and CGSLB took the opportunity of a meeting on 4 December 2010 with Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, to rally to the ETUC’s call to do everything possible to save jobs and for the recovery policy not to be prematurely interrupted at a time when the crisis in employment was spreading.

The Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG), better known as the European Budgetary Pact, was signed on 2 March 2012 in Brussels by the heads of state or government of 25 member states of the European Union (exceptions being the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic) and it came into force on 1 January 2013. It was in fact stipulated that it would come into force when 12 member states of the euro zone had ratified it. This became the case on 21 December 2012. As of 7 March 2013, it had been ratified by 19 member states (13 of which are in the euro zone). In the absence of a satisfactory response to the demands expressed at the end of December 2012, the FGTB and CSC in an open letter called on all parliaments in Belgium not to approve the Treaty and to send a clear signal with regard to the harmful European economic policy. The FGTB asked MPs to refuse to approve the Budgetary Pact in April 2013. Not without humour, the CSC’s National Union of Employees (Centrale nationale des employés/CNE) extolled the marketing of the Treaty, which it said had already achieved its goal: to be as confusing and boring as possible.

31. L’Echo, 8 March 2013.
so that ordinary people in the street would not be interested in it. Because if everyone had had a chance to look at it, there would certainly have been uproar.\footnote{CNE, Comprendre le pacte budgétaire en 12 minutes, 22 March 2013, see https://cne.csc-en-ligne.be/cne-gnc/actu/Filinfo/le-pacte-budgetaire-en-12-min.html} After more than 20 years of debate, on 22 December 2013, Belgium became the last State Party to the Treaty to ratify it, the Parliament of the Walloon-Brussels Federation being the seventh and final of the country’s assemblies to do so.

Another major European concern of the Belgian trade unions has been the fight against tax fraud. Like many other unions and the ETUC, they would like to see the emergence of a fiscal Europe. Their national context has fanned the flames on this issue. On 6 November 2014, the Belgian population learnt through a blow-by-blow account in the media that their Luxembourg neighbours had established a tax optimisation scheme (the famous LuxLeaks scandal) and that the Managing Director of Omega Pharma, Marc Coucke, would not be paying 1 euro of tax on his company’s 1.45 billion sales because his profits were not taxed in Belgium. This led Marc Leemans, President of the CSC, to state that

the anti-fraud policy is also unbalanced. The government’s agreement focuses heavily on benefit fraud, with new “ingenious” techniques such as a benefit fraud helpline, and checks made even on unemployed people’s water and energy bills. To date, however, there has been virtually no progress in the fight against wage fraud, employer contributions’ fraud or tax fraud. Has the government yet announced the slightest initiative in this regard?

LuxLeaks was the height of ‘tax hooliganism’.\footnote{Pourquoi la grève?, on the site https://www.csc-en-ligne.be/csc-en-ligne/Campagnes/un-plat-de-misere/faq-greves/interview-marc-leemans/interview-de-marc-leemans.html} The next day, a national demonstration brought 120,000 people out onto the streets of Brussels against the government policy. On Monday 15 December, Belgium was entirely paralysed by the largest strike in 30 years, called by all the trade unions and numerous associations. Strikers and demonstrators were protesting at the austerity measures announced by the federal government in order to meet Brussels’ demands.

Finally, the proactive role played by the Belgian organisations in relation to the Commission’s administrative simplification – or deregulation, as some would call them – programmes should also be noted. On 2 October 2013, the Commission published a communication on the REFIT (Regulatory Fitness and Performance) programme. In this, it announced new measures to ‘lighten the [administrative] burden on companies’, announcing in particular the continuation of quality evaluations and reports ‘with a view to reducing the regulatory burden’ but also the withdrawal of legislative proposals currently under way, along with a review of existing legislation (repeal, codification and so on). The Commission announced forthwith that it would not be submitting legislative proposals on health and safety at work for hairdressers or with regard to musculoskeletal disorders, screens and ambient tobacco smoke (European Commission 2013). The joint CGSLB-CSC-FGTB front rapidly launched the Rethink Refit campaign and the website www.rethinkrefit.eu, accompanied by a petition and the possibility of raising the issue with MEPs electronically. The Belgian unions denounced the deregulatory vision that saw all legislation as a burden, when in fact it is often protective. They also protested at the administrative simplification
programme which, under the guise of technical adjustments, actually involved deeply political choices. They further denounced the weakening of standards intended to protect workers from occupational diseases and the challenging of workers’ rights to information and consultation (particularly via the consolidation of directives on mass redundancy, worker information and consultation, company transfers and so on). The Belgian trade unions insisted that the ETUC should take the case up and coordinate it, while inviting other European unions to join the action and make use of the standard letters they had produced.

6. Conclusion

The Belgian trade union organisations were early players in the establishment of European trade unionism, which was constructed gradually following the founding of the ETUC in 1973. It echoed the old dream of a United States of Europe that was shared by a good number of union leaders who were aware of, if they did not participate in, the initial steps towards the European Communities. Tensions that exist nationally between unions of different traditions have not prevented them from cooperating on a European level, and playing a pioneering role on some occasions. We can mention cross-border cooperation and the formation of interregional councils, for example, in which the Benelux unions played a major role alongside their German and French colleagues in the 1970s. At the start of the 1980s, the ETUC recognised and then coordinated these initiatives, and this was to result particularly in the establishment of the EURES network (Tilly 2010). The Doorn group should also be noted, along with the regular participation in European mobilisations coordinated by the ETUC.

The increasing number of ETUC affiliates has sometimes been considered by the Belgian unions as representing a kind of loss of coherence for European trade unionism. They are not opposed to the enlargements as such but the Belgian unions nonetheless advocate that this should be accompanied by an enhanced role for the ETUC. By refusing some internal transformations, European trade unionism has not, in their eyes, yet succeeded in moving far enough along the path of integration. Both the FGTB and the CSC have thus called for a substantial increase in contributions that would enable the ETUC to gain more independence from the Commission and also for it to have greater strength of action. In the meanwhile, attempts at regional-level groupings are being continued, this being considered more likely to be able to produce common demands – or better defend national interests. In this regard, however, the example of the Doorn group shows us that initial enthusiasm for such a regional grouping is not necessarily a gauge of its long-term success.

34. See, for example, the special issue of Syndicaliste CSC devoted to REFIT (No 822, 10 April 2015).
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