Chapter 3

Belgium: Trade unions coping with workplace fissuring and opposing wage moderation in a tottering political system

Kurt Vandaele*

Belgian trade unions are still faring well compared with most other countries in the European Union (EU). A benevolent institutional setting at the workplace and industrial level proves relative robustness. First, union-only representative structures – union representatives, health and safety bodies and works councils – allow unions to establish and maintain a social norm of union membership, especially in large companies. Second, management has relatively lower incentives to openly resist unions at the workplace as the industry is the predominant level for collective bargaining (Western 1999). Third, unions are involved in paying out unemployment benefits, a variant of the ‘Ghent system’, stimulating unionization of the unemployed and workers with relatively higher unemployment risks and allowing unions to offer various services outside the workplace. Notably, the ‘institutional stickiness’ of this union security is buttressed by union activism and unions’ considerable mobilization capacity, as large-scale demonstrations and political mass strikes exemplify. Also, ideas of ‘social partnership’ underpinning a tradition of social dialogue and political advocacy enable unions to influence the political process, although success largely depends on the political parties currently in power. Finally, unions’ organizational learning probably needs to be brought into the equation to understand why union density has shown notable long-term stability, hovering around 55 per cent from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s.

*I am grateful to Jean-Marie De Baene, Raf De Weerdt, Chris Serroyen and Guy Van Gyes for their comments and suggestions.
Most indicators in Table 3.1 suggest that the industrial relations system remain fairly unchanged. But the challenges are mounting today. Union membership and density deteriorated during 2014–2019, although this has perhaps set in later than expected by observers who anticipated such a weakening at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Van Gyes et al. 2000). Net union density fell below a symbolic 50 per cent level in 2019. In addition, apart from reforms in unemployment insurance, labour market deregulation and flexibility have been incrementally promoted over time, giving rise to a tendency towards workplace fissuring (Weil 2014). This indirectly undermines union security and complicates union efforts to organize workers. Moreover, political parties, such as the Flemish nationalists, who are adversely disposed towards Belgium’s neocorporatist socio-economic decision-making, have been on the rise. Finally, unions’ room for wage negotiations is curtailed by a central wage norm, established in 1996 and tightened up in 2017, which has provoked fierce union opposition since then.

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<th>Table 3.1 Principal characteristics of trade unionism in Belgium</th>
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<td>Women as a proportion of total membership</td>
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<td>Gross union density**</td>
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<td>Number of independent unions</td>
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<td>Collective bargaining coverage</td>
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<td>96 %</td>
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<td>Principal level of collective bargaining</td>
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<td>Industry</td>
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<td>Days not worked due to industrial action per 1,000 workers</td>
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<td>71**</td>
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</table>

Note: *2018.

Source: Appendix A1; **ETUI.
Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system

Union pluralism and regional variation, a strong mobilization capacity, formal links with political parties and embeddedness in labour market and welfare institutions mark Belgian unionism historically (Faniel 2010). Union organizations have developed along three ideological lines. The segmentation of society into ‘pillars’ implied that they belonged to a broad organizational network, based on the same subculture, supporting workers ‘from the cradle to the grave’ (Strikwerda 1997). The ideological origins of the socialist General Federation of Belgian Labour (ABVV/FGTB, Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond) are rooted in anti-capitalism and representing the interests of the working class as a whole.\(^1\) Christian unions for workers only developed when the Catholic Church recognized the importance of the question sociale with the publication of the papal encyclical Rerum Novarum in 1891 and a fierce competition with the socialist unions started. The roots of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV/CSC, Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond) lay in rejecting socialist ‘class conflict’ and in emphasizing integration within and with society. The ideological orientation of the General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (ACLVB/CGSLB, Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België) rests on countervailing power within the labour market, highlighting direct benefits and gains for its members. The three union confederations could ideally be attributed to one edge of Hyman’s (2001) triangle on union identities, but in reality each confederation has been oscillating between two edges in Figure 3.1 over time, while variations in identities are also geographically relative, not absolute.

\(^1\) Full French names of institutions or organisations that can be abbreviated are not provided in the main text for reasons of space; they can be found in the abbreviations list.
Besides the different socio-demographic and political context, also uneven geographical industrialization typified Belgian unionism and membership dynamics from the outset (Mort Subite 1990). The shifting centre of economic gravity from French-speaking Wallonia to Dutch-speaking Flanders since the 1930s reinforced the ACV/CSC in the latter region and Belgium generally; ACV/CSC affiliates also commenced early on to organize workers beyond those employed in large factories. Deindustrialization eroded the ABVV/FGTB’s historical stronghold within manufacturing in Wallonia so that union pluralism would be stronger here. Relationships between the confederations nevertheless became less stressful over time (Pasture 1996): the practice of a ‘common union front’ at the national level vis-à-vis the employers’ associations and the state developed from 1936 onwards. Being facilitated by the ‘Social Pact’, an informal agreement concluded after clandestine negotiations between union and business leaders in 1944, union security gradually strengthened after the Second World War (Cassiers and Denayer 2010). Governance of the social security system by the ‘social partners’ was established, with the ‘Ghent system’ metamorphosing into a ‘quasi-Ghent system’ as unions retained a role in the now compulsory unemployment system by paying out unemployment benefits alongside a state agency (Vandaele 2006). Also, establishing health and safety committees and works councils was legally made possible, while joint committees for collective bargaining
were institutionalized at the industrial level and extended to more industries. Union pluralism was secured in 1952: representativeness criteria stipulated that confederations and their affiliates are entitled to bargain if they cover the whole country, and have a mandate in the two social dialogue institutions at the national level, the Central Economic Council (CRB/CEC, Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven) for economic matters and the National Labour Council (NAR/CNT, Nationale Arbeidsraad) for social affairs (Blaise 2010). The state thus promoted a consensual approach via a dense neocorporatist architecture, subordinating strike action to bargaining (Vercauteren 2007). A similar approach would later be followed in the three economic-based Regions and three language-based Communities in a federalized Belgium (Installé et al. 2010). An ‘institutionalization of conflict’ rather than an ‘institutionalization of cooperation’ has marked Belgian ‘social partnership’, however (Therborn 1992). Union mobilization continued in a still ‘pillarized’ society after the Second World War, and industrial action did not wither away.

In hindsight, the ABVV/FGTB, leading in Wallonia, has interpreted the ‘Social Pact’ as only a temporal ‘historical compromise’ between the two sides of industry in anticipation of structural reforms within capitalism (Hemmerijckx 1995). Its understanding of being instrumental for the development of a ‘social market economy’ has traditionally been dominant in Flanders due to the ACV/CSC’s predominance. In practice, biennial bipartite negotiations between the ‘social partners’ at the cross-industrial level, outside the formal social dialogue institutions, resulted in seven interprofessional agreements (IPA/AIP, interprofessioneel akkoord) between 1960 and 1976, boosting a Keynesian growth regime based partly on increasing domestic demand. IPA/AIPs are not binding; they offer a framework for Belgium’s multi-level bargaining system. IPA/AIPs can also lay down minimum standards for all employees in the private sector, to be translated into collective agreements at the cross-industrial level. For example, a cross-industry agreement, given legal force via a Royal Decree, introduced a guaranteed average monthly minimum wage in 1975. The industrial level is considered dominant, however, because its collective agreements are broad in scope, including non-wage issues, and provide legal content following cross-industry agreements (Vandekerckhove and Van Gyes 2012).

State ‘intervention’ in wage-setting became increasingly important when an IPA/AIP could not be agreed in 1976. The practice of concluding IPA/AIPs revived in 1986, however, and a more established biennial
collective bargaining cycle started. ‘Economic vulnerability’ is a common assumption among the economic and political elites, given Belgium’s small open economy (Jones 2008). Hence, introducing a wage norm in the private sector, the ‘competitiveness law’ of 1989, was strengthened in 1996 to ensure entry to the European Monetary Union (Vilrokx and Van Leemput 1998); Belgium entered the eurozone in 1999. The new law consolidated the return to an export-oriented growth regime based on supply-side wage moderation since the early 1980s (Van den Broeck 2010). It anchored state ‘intervention’ in wage-setting and institutionally modelled collective bargaining on ‘competitive corporatism’ by curtailing multi-employer bargaining through calibrating wage developments in France, Germany and the Netherlands. Simultaneously, Belgium is one of the few EU countries in which the principle of wage indexation has largely remained intact in settled collective agreements. Wages and social benefits still ‘automatically’ adjust to changing prices of goods and services via a ‘health index’, introduced in 1994, which excludes heavily tax-influenced commodities such as alcohol, motor fuel and tobacco. Wage indexation linked to the ‘health index’, operationalized via diverse arrangements at the industrial level, thus sets a floor for wage-setting, whereas the wage norm provides a centralized ceiling.

Structure of trade unions and union democracy

Two idiosyncrasies of Belgian unionism are noteworthy from a comparative EU perspective. First, based on publicly available self-reported membership figures, the ACV/CSC is the only confessional confederation that surpassed a socialist one in member size from 1958 to 2018. The ACV/CSC and the ABVV/FGTB – with 1,534,199 and 1,547,325 members in 2020, respectively – dominate the union landscape. Second, the much smaller ACLVB/CGSLB, with 307,805 members in 2020, is the only liberal confederation in the EU (Faniel and Vandaele 2011), whereby solely public sector workers and teachers in non-state organized schools have specific unions; workers in other industries are direct members of the confederation. The quasi-monopoly position of these three confederations implies that not many independent unions are active. Although their exact number and membership are unknown, most are small occupational unions presenting themselves as ‘neutral’. They are active mainly in the public sector except for the National Confederation
of Staff (NCK/CNC, \textit{Nationale Confederatie van het Kaderpersoneel}) organizing managerial staff in the private sector.

Union members are simultaneously part of their union within the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC, with internal divisions organizing members into subindustries, and regional structures, which are local branches geographically defined by the place where members live. Manual workers are organized by unions per industry, whereas non-manual workers have their own unions that group them occupationally across industrial boundaries. The legal distinction that formerly existed between employment statutes explains this organizing principle. Unions anticipated the labour law change of 2013 for a unified employment status and partial harmonization of existing statutes via swapping members in certain industries over the years. Member transfers continue today: this process materializes gradually, given its influence upon relationships between unions and vis-à-vis employers’ associations at the industrial level.

Most unions are still national: they organize workers throughout the country. There are some noteworthy exceptions. The white-collar unions in the ACV/CSC have been divided virtually from the outset, but separated formally in 1984, while educational unions split in the early 1990s at the subnational level so they would be able to lobby political authorities more effectively. Notably, internal discord over policies instigated a formal regional divide in the ABVV/FGTB metal union into a Brussels, Flemish and Walloon ‘entity’ in 2006. A federal umbrella structure, with competence only for federal matters, is kept for liaising with the confederation, while the Brussels ‘entity’ is \textit{de facto} a subunit of the Walloon ‘entity’. The Flemish and Walloon/Brussels ‘entities’ are considered to be separate unions here. ABVV/FGTB and ACV/CSC affiliates organizing solely within one Region increased their overall member share from 18.5 to 23.9 per cent from 2000 to 2019.
### Figure 3.2 ABVV/FGTB and ACV/CSC affiliates and mergers, 2000–2020

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**Note:** The listed union names are those stated in 2021; full names can be found in the abbreviations list.

**Source:** ABVV/FGTB, ACV/CSC.
Seven unions are affiliated to the ABVV/FGTB today. This confederation has historically weak authority over its affiliates, with each union maintaining a strike fund; a relatively higher turnover also marks the confederal leadership in the period considered here. The membership share of the three largest unions increased from 72 to 77 per cent from 2000 to 2020. Only the multi-sector General Workers Union (AC/CG, *Algemene Centrale*) has been involved in a merger by ‘acquiring’ a small occupational union facing perpetual membership decline (see Figure 3.2). Their membership share, together with that of private service sector unions, has increased, whereas the metal unions, as the only industrial unions left within the ABVV/FGTB, are losing ground. They have established close cooperation with the transport union, which was formalized in 2018 and reinforced two years later as regards ‘organizational matters and politico-syndical standpoints’.

Turning to the ACV/CSC, with 10 affiliated unions today, the locus of its power is equally not at the confederal level but rests with the affiliates, although arguably less so than in the socialist confederation; the ACV/CSC operates a centralized strike fund. Membership concentration grew, with the share of the three largest unions rising from 47 to 54 per cent from 2000 to 2019. Mergers have made the ACV/CSC less fragmented. Unions organizing within education in the French Community ‘amalgamated’ in 2006. Union mergers in various industries, resulting in two new multi-industry union, can be considered ‘acquisitions’. Figure 3.3 shows that there are no genuine industrial unions left in the Christian confederation. A new merger is under way between the metal and textiles union and the union organizing in construction, energy and chemicals, which will boost membership concentration by more than 10 percentage points. The Flemish white-collar union will then become the second-largest ACV/CSC affiliate instead of the largest, giving way to the new multi-industry union will have the lead.

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2 ACV Puls formally joined the fund in 2002.
**Figure 3.3** Membership distribution by union type and Region (averages), 2000–2009 and 2010–2019

Note: * The Brussels-Capital Region includes part of the Flanders Region (Halle- Vilvoorde).
Source: ABVV/FGTB, ACV/CSC.
Local branches constitute the ‘interprofessional structure’: they are geographically grouped across affiliated unions. A process of upscaling has marked this structure, especially in the ACV/CSC. Branches have an important administrative and coordinating role within their geographical areas of operation. They provide advice and services to union members via an extended network of service centres, and offer educational work and support for union activists and unions. Branches also identify and campaign around collective issues within and beyond the workplace, and seek alliance-building with civil society actors. Local branches are part of the confederations’ regional and linguistic sub-structures, which have gained considerably in importance following the devolution of the Belgian state (Vandaele and Hooghe 2013). The regional membership distribution is fairly stable in both the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC (see Figure 3.3). The francophone member share is substantial in the ABVV/FGTB, although still in a minority in all affiliates except for the public sector union, whereas ‘Flanders’ is predominant in the ACV/CSC and the ACLVB/CGSLB. At the confederal level, one-third of the mandates are assigned to the Brussels, Flemish and Walloon sub-structures, whereas unions account for two-thirds.

Unions, regional sub-structures and confederations in principle hold congresses every four years. Union decision-making is characterized by bottom-up processes of interest aggregation and agenda-setting, providing room for union activists – labelled ‘militants’ – and procedures of indirect democracy, whereby every decision-making level chooses its representatives at higher levels, based on membership size. Within the ACV/CSC, for instance, its affiliates and local branches and the regional and confederal decision-making levels should be composed at least 50 per cent of activists, with proportional representation of women and representation of young people, the unemployed and workers with a migrant background (ACV 2019b). Feedback-loops and ratification procedures are also built into union decision-making processes for concluding collective agreements and IPA/AIPs. Unions sometimes also use surveys to better gauge the interests and needs of the rank-and-file regarding the bargaining agenda, or to evaluate their services.
Specific structures are in place for women, young people, the unemployed, migrants, workers on early retirement and pensioners (the latter only within the Brussels and Walloon ACV/CSC sub-structures). All three confederations signed a charter on gender mainstreaming in 2004 to promote gender equality of men and women at the workplace and in their decision-making structures. Still, although the share of women in unions has increased (Appendix A1), and the first female leader at the confederal level was elected in the ABVV/FGTB in 2002, women are still underrepresented and their participation in decision-making structures is low (Ravesloot 2012). Students and young people have their own separate structures, set up after the Second World War, within the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC, whereas the ACLVB/CGSLB caught up in 2010 (Pulignano and Doerflinger 2014). Confederation actions and lobbying on issues regarding young people indicate that their interests and needs are looked after, although the situation of dedicated youth structures within individual unions is more patchy, with some being more energetic than others (Berntsen 2019). The unemployed have had their own ‘jobless workers’ commissions’ since the early 1980s, but their working is ‘somewhat erratic’, influenced by regional unemployment dynamics (Faniel 2012a). Finally, regarding migrant workers, confederations and their affiliates over time have promoted polices on equal treatment and opportunities, citizenship, antiracism and social clauses against discrimination (Martens and Pulignano 2008).

Union resources and expenditure

Little is publicly known about the financial performance of union organizations. Besides returns on financial investments, a distinction can be made between three other income sources, although their relative size and changes over time are unspecified. First, members’ subscriptions themselves are the unions’ main source of income. Local branches in the ABVV/FGTB decide upon lump-sum rates, whereas this is done by union affiliates in the ACV/CSC. Subscription rates are set rather low, and the competitive union landscape disincentivizes wide variations between unions. The ACV/CSC endeavours to achieve further harmonization among its affiliates today. Also, this confederation has been setting subscriptions for young workers (between 18 and 25 years of age) since 2019 and has lowered them (ACV/CSC 2019b). It is unsure, however, whether
this approach recruits workers beyond those already convinced of the benefits of membership (Delespaal and Doerflinger 2019). Rates are also reduced for other member categories, such as the part-time employed, the unemployed, workers on long-term sick leave or early retirement and pensioners. Membership is free for students in all confederations except for most ABVV/FGTB Walloon local branches.

Member dues are typically paid by direct debit to the union or its local branch – the latter is common in the ACV/CSC. Financial flows between union structures depend on the membership categories and union organization in question. In the ACV/CSC (2019b), for example, based on a full-time working member 20 years of age, the financial flow is as follows: the union and local branch receive each 36 per cent, while 11 per cent goes to the confederal level and 7 per cent is allocated to the central strike fund; the remaining 10 per cent is budgeted for member magazines and affiliation fees to other (union) organizations and international solidarity. In order to run the union apparatus and offer services, the ACV/CSC (2020) and the ACLVB/CGSLB\(^5\) employed 3,283 and 594 staff in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Unions offer a wide range of professionalized services, often oriented towards employability, such as career guiding and training. Unions have held webinars during the Covid-19 pandemic, as their service centres were (partly) closed. Services also include providing information about employment contracts, legal assistance in case of labour disputes, and help in completing tax forms. Furthermore, unions pay out strike benefits, and other benefits could include small bonuses such as on the occasion of marriage or moving in together, childbirth or adoption, and retirement, as well as reductions for members in union-run holiday residences or for other leisure activities, and shopping discounts.

Second, bipartite welfare funds are instrumental for providing indirect support to union membership and activities. Employers finance the funds, which are jointly administered by employers’ associations and unions at the industry level. They are established and regulated by collective agreements so that the degree of union support varies between industries. The funds annually pay out a ‘union premium’ in several, but not all industries, which is an additional benefit for union

\(^4\) Dues can also be deducted directly from wages.

\(^5\) See https://www.aclvb.be/nl/structuur-en-kerncijfers-van-de-aclvb#kerncijfers
Although payment is subject to compliance with ‘social peace’ clauses in collective agreements, this is barely applied in practice. The premium can substantially decrease union dues in particular industries, so that union membership comes at a low cost. Obtaining membership is hence instrumentally strengthened and free-riding is lessened in a system in which industrial collective agreements are almost always extended. Welfare funds usually supplement unemployment and early retirement benefits, too (Van Rie et al. 2011). These top-up benefits are in theory available to non-union members, but unions sometimes charge for administrative costs on that account. Thus, in practice, union membership is incentivized, also because it is more convenient to receive unemployment or early retirement benefit and top-ups via the same agency. Finally, funds also typically finance skill-based education for workers and training for members of the health and safety bodies and works councils; collective agreements regulate the conditions and modalities for granting facility time.

Third, the state (indirectly) supports the unions financially, either as an employer or otherwise. Thus, similar arrangements are in place regarding the ‘union premium’ for civil servants and facility time for union representatives in state administration and state-related organizations. Furthermore, union dues are tax deductible in case of unemployment, as they can be deducted from unemployment benefit, or if the taxpayer opts to include the cost in their tax declaration. Unions can also be granted certain subsidies for educational activities, international development cooperation, specific projects or youth work. Most importantly, the ‘quasi-Ghent system’ implies that the state reimburses agents for their involvement in the administration of unemployment-related benefits, based on a complex formula (Vandaele 2006). These agents are run either by the union confederations or the state via the branch office for unemployment benefits (HVW/CAPAC, Hulpkas Voor Werkloosheidsuitkeringen), which is governed by the ‘social partners’ as part of the social security system. The HVW/CAPAC guarantees that receiving unemployment-related benefits is not contingent on union membership. Although this state agency supports the non-unionized for free, its share in benefit administration is rather low and even declined slowly until 2019 (see Figure 3.4).

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6 The premium is not subject to taxation up to a certain maximum, which has been set at 145 euros since 2018.
Belgium: Coping and opposing of trade unions

Figure 3.4 Share of agents in the provision of unemployment insurance and reimbursement, 2000–2020

Source: RVA/ONEM.
Unions are considered to be more efficient than the HVW/CAPAC, irrespective of scale effects (*De Tijd* 3 May 2016). Union dominance is explained by the historical identification of unions with benefit payment, their dense network of payment services and ability to pay benefits slightly earlier than the HVW/CAPAC, and (perceptions of) better service. The percentage of the unemployed who are union members has scarcely changed, standing at 87 per cent in 2020. Confederations established separate payment services with their own accounting in 1996; legally, disbursements cannot be used for other union activities. The procyclical link between unemployment and membership entails that falling unemployment implies decreasing disbursements, while fixed costs for staff and ICT investments are mounting, so that deficits can occur. Every so often, the formula for calculating disbursements is subject to change, which is largely dependent on the economic circumstances and balance of power in the federal government. For instance, the Di Rupo government (2011–2014, comprising social democrats, economic liberals and Christian Democrats) introduced an annual reduction in disbursements from 2013, but this can be mitigated. Finally, the furlough scheme during the Covid-19 pandemic highlights how the ‘quasi-Ghent system’ is also subject to unemployment law reforms. The scheme has entailed a massive increase in ‘temporary unemployed workers’, resulting in difficulties in service provision, especially in the HVW/CAPAC (*De Federale Ombudsman* 2021). Even so, 31 per cent turned to the state agency (*RVA* 2021), and thus eschewed union membership.

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7. The overall correlation between disbursements and gross union membership stands at 0.91 in the period 2000–2019 but is 0.69 for net membership.

8. Also, decreasing disbursements because of falling unemployment have been made to slow down in 2022 (*De Tijd* 22 October 2021).
Belgium: Coping and opposing of trade unions

Unionization

Membership data can be retrieved only from union administrative records or occasional surveys. Unions have historically inflated member figures for reasons of mutual competition or the sometimes delayed and irregular payment of union dues (Ebbinghaus et al. 2000). This practice should not be overestimated, however: the coefficient for inflating membership has gradually decreased, while concealing membership trends is impractical. The ABVV/FGTB claims no longer to apply a coefficient, and the ACLVB/CGSLB declares that it has gradually reduced this practice since the 1990s (Faniel and Vandaele 2012). The ACV/CSC has publicly stated that it no longer uses it, and revised its figures from 2000 onwards, resulting in a lower figure for membership. Overall membership achieved its highest number ever recorded in 2014, at 3,400,359 (see Figure 3.5). The continuous membership growth registered since the Second World War (except for some years in the 1980s) has halted, however. The ACV/CSC has experienced a membership decline since 2011, the ABVV/FGTB from 2014 onwards. Both lost 176,543 members overall (excluding students) during 2013–2019. The ACLVB/CGSLB, by contrast, has enjoyed ongoing membership gains, although its growth rate nearly halved in the 2010s compared with the previous decade.

\[ A \text{ comparison between old inflated and new data reveals a coefficient of between 11 and 12 per cent.} \]

\[ T \text{his figure excludes students, except in the case of the ACLVB/CGSLB as its share of students is unknown. If students are included, there were 3,488,624 members in 2014.} \]

\[ A \text{BVV/FGTB membership also declined in 1961–1962.} \]

\[ A \text{s one of the first policy responses to decline, the ‘administrative cleaning’ of membership records has produced some additional reductions.} \]
Figure 3.5  Union membership and density since 2000 and changes in membership (%), 2001–2010 and 2011–2020
Belgium: Coping and opposing of trade unions

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Source: Appendix A1; ABVV/FGTB, ACLVB/CGSLB, ACV/CSC.
Membership increases have slowed down considerably at the ABVV/FGTB, and this confederation is no longer making progress in Wallonia. Falling membership or meagre rises marked ACV/CSC affiliates in the 2010s, while membership decreased in all regions. Industrial and multi-industry unions in particular have seen a plunge in membership in both confederations. Overall membership growth resumed again in 2020, making up over one-third of losses, especially among white-collar unions and unions organizing in hospitality and transport. This is because of the furlough scheme’s impact on the ‘quasi- Ghent system’. As decline is more marked in the Christian confederation, the membership ratio with the ABVV/FGTB has diminished, in particular in Flanders. Some ambiguity remains concerning the latter’s use of a coefficient, however (OECD and Visser 2021). Thus the ACV/CSC can still be considered the largest confederation.

While net unionization has been fluctuating at around 55 per cent since the early 1990s, union density stood at 49.1 per cent in 2019. Taking into account non-active members, such as the unemployed and pensioners, gross density is considerably higher. Belgian unions are encompassing organizations, and about one-third of their members are (temporally) not in employment (Faniel and Vandaele 2012). Differences in unionization rates based on gender, age or company size are compressed compared with other EU countries (Van Gyes et al. 2000), but rates are more diverse between education levels (Vendramin 2007) or occupational status as a result of different levels of job insecurity (De Witte 2005). The ‘quasi-Ghent system’ thus incentivizes certain worker categories to unionize and to remain in membership, especially those with higher unemployment risks or with lower educational attainment (Van Rie et al. 2011), whereas ‘middle- and upper-class employees’ are underrepresented (Strøby Jensen 2020).

Parental socialization has become a less important motive for unionization among younger age categories over time (Swyngedouw et al. 2016), although it still plays a certain role (Delespaul and Doerflinger 2019). Also, membership decline might be generated virtually ‘automatically’ by large and highly unionized cohorts reaching early retirement or pension age and leaving the labour market. Based on annual administrative reports, the ACV/CSC data indeed show an ageing membership, although the share of members younger than 25 years of age has been improving since 2017. Moreover, ongoing deindustrialization, also affecting Flanders, where the ACV/CSC is relatively stronger,
presumably contributes to membership weakening, especially among multi-industry unions.\footnote{The same reasoning applies to ABVV/FGTB, especially regarding membership dynamics in Wallonia.} Membership gains in private services no longer seemed able to compensate for this in 2010–2019; the same holds true for the public sector, in which austerity measures stalled employment growth. Also, the ACV/CSC’s share in the benefit administration of the ‘quasi-Ghent system’ has been steadily deteriorating over time, which has resulted in closures of service centres (ACV 2019a). Certain categories of (unemployed) workers might thus be less likely to join this confederation. Although the duration of unemployment benefit payment remains, in principle, unlimited, tighter restrictions on entitlement to unemployment and early retirement benefits (Lefebvre 2019), especially in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial and economic crisis, might further explain overall union decline. Being numerous in Brussels-Capital and the Walloon Region, the long-term unemployed can be excluded from receiving benefits more rapidly today, making it necessary for them to turn to social services.\footnote{Anecdotal evidence suggests that social services advise people to cancel union membership to cut costs.} Arrangements regarding the activation allowance for graduates, paid out by either the unions or the HVW/CAPAC, have also changed since 2012. The ‘waiting period’ has been lengthened for new graduates entitled to the allowance, while the entitlement period is no longer unlimited: early unionization of young people via the ‘quasi-Ghent system’ is thus discouraged.

Tactics associated with an organizing approach are not unfamiliar to Belgian unions. They have an institutionally driven interest in identifying future (young) union activists for inviting them to be candidates on the social election lists. The period prior to the quadrennial social elections for health and safety committees and works councils provides unions with an opportunity to reach out to workers and prioritize their issues. Union education focuses mainly on union representatives and elected candidates, however. There are generally no dedicated programmes for non-elected ones or ordinary members, or for finding potential activists in the years between elections. Also, a considerable percentage of workers have no direct union exposure in their workplace as elections are held only in companies in the private sector above a certain employment threshold. Union representatives in some industries might nevertheless
be active in smaller companies, and union density is relatively high here compared with non-Ghent countries. This cannot be attributed solely to the Belgian ‘quasi-Ghent system’; specific union strategies also play a role. These include holding local meetings in an effort to reach members in smaller companies; ‘network unionism’, which involves joint meetings between unionists in subcontractors and principal companies; and coaching and mentoring of activists in smaller companies by activists in larger ones (Van Gyes 2010).

Union activities and campaigns sometimes target specific worker categories, with a particular focus recently on platform workers (Vandaele 2020b). The ACV/CSC established a new unit ‘United Freelancers’ in 2019 to organize freelancers, including platform workers. Various projects focusing on the membership dimension had already been initiated in all confederations before membership decline set in (Faniel 2012b). In particular, a renewed focus on students started in the early 2000s, offering free membership, advice and legal assistance, and targeted policies to raise awareness about unionism, for example, at schools and music festivals (Berntsen 2019; Vendramin 2007). Free membership for students has resulted in rapid membership growth in the ACV/CSC and, later on, the ABVV/FGTB, but their shares have declined since 2009 and 2017, respectively. Finally, individual union activists or full-time officials might be inspired by US-style organizing, but a systematic approach, going beyond social elections, with drives in targeted weakly unionized industries, has been nearly absent so far. Using organizing tactics avant-la-lettre since the end of 1980s, the branch within the ACV/CSC affiliate organizing in the not-for-profit sector in Flanders might be an exception (Vanhooren and Deceunynck 2005). Other ACV/CSC affiliates, in particular the white-collar union in Flanders, are showing a growing interest in experimenting with US-style (digital) organizing (ACV 2019a). Research is also under way.

**Collective bargaining and unions at the workplace**

Centralization, which provides strong coordination between interlinked hierarchical bargaining levels, is one of the main features of Belgium’s collective bargaining system in the private sector. Union

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15 Employment terms and conditions in the public sector are set by law; its bargaining cycle is different from that of the private sector, and bargaining can include consultation or negotiation.
density is high, as is the organization rate of the employers’ associations, the latter standing at 82 per cent in 2018 (Vandaele 2019a). Collective agreements at the industrial and cross-industrial levels are nearly always extended, which results in a stable bargaining coverage of 96 per cent. The law on the ‘promotion of employment and the preventive safeguarding of competitiveness’ of 1996 (henceforth: the ‘competitiveness law’) curtails lower bargaining levels via a ‘wage norm’. Calculating the norm at the cross-industrial level has been an entirely ‘technocratic’ exercise since the revision of the competitiveness law in 2017. It is no longer CRB/CCE as a whole – in which the ‘social partners’ are represented on a parity basis – that provides negotiating flexibility, but solely its secretariat, which is entrusted with estimating the wage norm and predicting national inflation for two-year periods. Also, the norm is no longer considered indicative. Wage increases are now bound to it, whereas before increases could be agreed above the norm in well-performing companies or industries. Setting the norm itself is part of the biennial IPA/AIP negotiations among the ‘Group of Ten’, an informal group comprising the general-secretary and president of both the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC, the ACLVB/CGSLB president and five representatives from four employers’ associations.\footnote{‘Ceci n’est pas un group des 10’: in a typically Belgian (surrealistic) manner, there are eleven people at the negotiating table. The president of the main employers’ association traditionally acts as the president of the ‘Group of Ten’ and does not represent its organisation.}

Concluding an IPA/AIP is considered symbolic for Belgium’s bipartite ‘social partnership’ model. Domestic inflationary wage developments exceeding the wage norm; wage moderation in the three reference countries, especially in Germany; and sombre economic prospects can all cast negotiations into disarray from the start. If a draft IPA/AIP is concluded, then ABVV/FGTB and ACV/CSC affiliates, the ACLVB/CGSLB and regional union sub-structures vote on the draft. This occasionally exposes divides and tensions between union organizations or sub-structures. Deadlocked negotiations are cited time and again in the media to call its legitimacy into question. This denies, however, the longstanding practice of collective bargaining within the NAR/CNT and at lower levels. Failed negotiations trigger state ‘intervention’: the federal government is authorized to suspend negotiations and to propose a compromise or, ultimately, to set an imperative wage norm, mainly following the draft IPA/AIP, especially if it is supported by most ‘social partners’. Six IPA/AIPs have been
concluded successfully since 1996, but this has to be set against eight (partial) failures. All negotiations have been unsuccessful since the 2007–2008 financial and economic crisis except for the 2016 IPA/AIP.

State-sponsored coordination seems a necessary yet insufficient condition for facilitating IPA/AIP agreements. Because other types of state sponsorship are challenging as a result of Belgian devolution (Arcq and Pochet 2000) — education and labour market policies are subnational competences — state sponsorship focused mainly on cutting employers’ social security contributions before the 2007–2008 crisis. Being strongly dependent on budgetary and fiscal policies, this type of state sponsorship has now reached its limits, especially as employers’ social security contributions were structurally reduced by a tax shift in 2016. Above all, the Michel I government (2014–2018, composed of economic liberals, the Flemish nationalists and Flemish Christian Democrats) strengthened the competitiveness law in 2017 by building into the wage norm calculation an ex-ante safety margin and ex-post correction mechanisms, thereby further reducing negotiating flexibility. Persistent wage restraint via state-imposed coordination has been the outcome since then, as IPA/AIP negotiations failed in 2018, 2020 and 2022.

Wage restraint is linked to a restricted scope for wage negotiations at lower bargaining levels and a bargaining system that is becoming more fragmented. Negotiating flexibility is therefore often sought in non-wage demands and remuneration types that are omitted from wage norm calculations and commonly partly exempted from social security contributions and taxes, such as luncheon and other vouchers and bonuses, especially at the company level (Van Gyes et al. 2021). Company-level bonus plans were introduced in 2008; Figure 3.6 demonstrates their extraordinary growth. So-called ‘cafeteria plans’ are increasingly being used in an attempt to replace current benefits and wage increases via a set of individualized alternative benefits. A tax-favourable ‘profit premium’ set unilaterally by management has also been possible since 2018. All these variable pay schemes are helping to exacerbate wage inequality. Finally, fragmentation also comes in as a result of the devolution of the Belgian state, which implies that bargaining units in certain industries, in particular related to the public sector, only cover the Region or Community. This tests trade union bargaining coordination as different Regions are gradually developing different employment terms and conditions. Yet, a genuinely disorganized decentralization has not been a policy option so far, also because of the unions’ institutional embeddedness in the workplace, especially in large companies.
Figure 3.6 Number of collective agreements at the company and industrial levels, 2000–2020

Note: * Bonus plans are included, but their number was unknown at the time of writing.
Source: FOD WASO/SPF ETCS.
Turning to workplace democracy, whereas board-level employee representation is absent (except at the public railway company until 2002), there is a union-dominated dual system of worker representation. First, union representatives are normally active in companies with at least fifty employees; this threshold is lowered in various industries by collective agreement. Second, health and safety committees (since 1952) are legally required in private sector companies with fifty employees or more and works councils (since 1948) in companies with 100 employees or more. Quadrennial elections, taking place since 1950, determine the composition of these bodies (Op den Kamp and Van Gyes 2010). Only the three union confederations can propose candidates. There are two exceptions. Since 1987 a separate electoral college can be established at companies with managerial staff comprising a minimum of fifteen members: the NCK/CNC or staff themselves can nominate candidates, though without much electoral success. Elections in the national railway company were equally not successful for independent unions in 2018. This was the first time elections were held. No elections take place in the rest of the public sector.

Transposing the 2002 EU directive on informing workers has meant that health and safety committees in smaller companies are taking over some of the competences of work councils, if one is not in place.
Figure 3.7 Participating rate and social election results for works councils, 2000–2020

Source: FOD WASO/SPF ETCS.
Social election candidates, whether elected or not, are protected against dismissal. They are considered the ‘heart of trade unions’, together with union representatives. Both ideally aggregate workers’ interests and needs in the workplace, and discuss union standpoints with them. Their presence is associated with, for instance, more occupational training and stronger knowledge of individual and collective workers’ rights and their application (Hermans et al. 2020). Figure 3.7 demonstrates a declining election participation rate, however. Unions are also increasingly experiencing difficulties convincing workers to run as candidates, especially among women and young workers. Although non-standard contracts might partly explain this, it also reveals how member recruitment of young workers has become a challenge.\(^{18}\) The election results illustrate that the ACLVB/CGSLB has steadily risen in popularity, resulting probably in a stronger union pluralism in workplaces. ABVV/FGTB and ACV/CSC results show an overall slow-moving weakening, but with differences between industries and Regions. The ACV/CSC’s share is decreasing in the non-for-profit sector in Flanders, which is marked by institutions associated with the Christian ‘pillar’, while the ABVV/FGTB’s share in the profit sector in Wallonia has also been weakening, at least until 2016.

**Industrial conflict**

The right to strike is an individual right, and considered fairly liberal in Belgium (Humblet and Rigaux 2016). If their union has recognized the action, which is normally the case, then union members are entitled to strike benefits, which rise as the strike continues. Case law has laid down rules on industrial action as unions fear the liability that goes along with legal personality. Legislative proposals for stricter regulation of industrial action have a long history, however (Humblet 2007). Recently regulation has become stricter in certain public services, including laws on a guaranteed minimum service level in the case of industrial action in railways and prisons in 2017 and 2019. Similar minimum service arrangements have been in place in the main public transport companies in Flanders and Wallonia since 2021 and 2017, respectively, via covenants between these companies and the respective subnational governments stipulating certain requirements that need to be met in case of industrial action.

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\(^{18}\) Temporary agency workers have been entitled to vote at their place of work since 2020.
Apart from a notice period for preventing labour disputes, collective agreements contain ‘social peace’ clauses, although industrial action is usually still possible in practice; there is no legal distinction between legal and illegal action. Secondary action is possible as well. Also, joint committees at the industry level usually have conciliation bodies, through which national officials of the ‘social partners’ advise local parties on how to end disputes. In addition, labour conciliators of the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue (FOD WASO/SPF ETCS, Federale Overheidsdienst Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Sociaal Overleg) can be called in for mediation in the case of stalled labour disputes. These conciliators also act as chairs of joint committees and their conciliation body.

Lockouts seldom occur but are possible. Employers are not allowed to replace workers while they are on strike. Instead, they have been using the civil courts to break strikes since the mid-1980s through the unilateral imposition of substantial fines on picketing workers. Under pressure from the federal government, the ‘social partners’ agreed to halt this juridification of industrial action by concluding a non-binding ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ in 2002 (Palsterman 2002). As juridification continued, again under government pressure, the ‘partners’ promised to ‘modernize’ the agreement in 2016 but negotiations failed. Recent court rulings have also put pressure on the right to take industrial action: for example, ABVV/FGTB activists were convicted for the ‘malicious obstruction of traffic’ during industrial action against austerity measures by the Michel I government in 2015–2016.

Belgian unions are real ‘mobilization machines’ (Andretta et al. 2016). This has been exemplified by various large-scale demonstrations against, for instance, labour market reforms and austerity measures, especially since 2011. Participation in union-staged demonstrations is commonly covered by strike benefits, which mainly incentivizes strongly union-committed members. Those are predominantly union activists who act as mobilization facilitators, but unions have difficulties mobilizing beyond this network of often middle-aged activists. This has been described as a ‘crisis behind the figures’ (Faniel 2012b).

The years 2001, 2005 and 2014 are three particular peaks in industrial action since 2000 (Appendix A1). Strikes against reforms in education, especially in Wallonia, explain the 2001 upsurge. The 2005 peak was the result of a general strike arising from failed negotiations between the ‘social partners’ and federal government about the ‘Generational Pact’ to reform
early retirement pension schemes. Another 24-hour general strike took place against the austerity measures imposed by the Di Rupo government in early 2012. Its rather low participation can be explained by a large public sector strike at the end of 2011. A third general strike clarifies the 2014 peak. The Michel I government unilaterally decided to gradually increase the retirement age from 65 to 67 years, and to impose several austerity measures. The strike was preceded by supposedly the largest union-staged demonstration since 1986, with about 120,000 participants, and rotating industrial action at the county level. This remarkable union mobilization yielded hardly any results, however, as the government’s ideological and organizational alignment with the unions was minimal. Nevertheless, measured by days not worked due to industrial action, the Michel I government has been the second most contested since 1991 (Vandaele 2019b), the year from which the new data series are available.

National demonstrations and strike actions, mainly about pension-related reforms, reappeared from 2016 onwards but they did not reach the 2014 participation level. They were less coordinated, and there was union discord about the exact timing of the strike weapon and its effectiveness. Tensions arose not only between affiliates and the regional substructures within the confederations, but also between the latter, although their relations are generally pragmatic. While the ABVV/FGTB called a national 24-hour strike against government pension policies in 2016, this did not exclude ACV/CSC members from taking industrial action as well, especially in Wallonia. The latter Region, though dominated by two counties, Hainaut and Liège, has been more strike-prone than Flanders (Vandaele 2021), although reliable data on industrial action by Region has only been available since 2017. A ‘united union front’ restored afterwards, however, and union mobilization at the national level has recently taken a more ‘offensive’ character. Grievances have centred around restoring purchasing power and against the strictness of the competitiveness law since its reform. Notable industrial action for higher wages took place in manufacturing in late 2018 and in the private sector via 24-hour national strikes after the failure of IPA/AIP negotiations in both early 2019 and 2021. Union organizations started a petition in early 2022 to initiate a parliamentary debate on the current competitiveness law. In general, union organizations have increasingly turned to actions beyond industrial action, especially litigation, though with mixed results.

19 A general strike is defined here as a strike called by all three union confederations for all industries in both the private and public sector.
Figure 3.8 Share of days not worked because of industrial action by industry or sector and their strike-proneness*, 2007–2020

Share of industry or sector

Manufacturing  Construction  Transport and logistics
Private services sector  Social profit  Public sector
Note: * Measured per 1,000 employees in the respective industry or sector. Data available since 2007. Grouping based on joint committees. Series break in 2013.
Source: RSZ/ONSS.
Belgium traditionally belonged somewhere in the middle of the EU ‘strike league table’ up to the 1990s (Scheuer 2006). This has changed: the country has now moved above the EU average. Its ranking is the result of unions’ continued use of a ‘labour repertoire’ that includes general 24-hour strikes to impose political pressure, while strike activity has declined in most EU countries (Vandaele 2016). Public sector strikes have gained as well in importance since 2014, when austerity measures mainly hit this sector (see Figure 3.8). Whereas political mass-strikes, either public sector or general, dominate statistics, industrial action to put economic pressure is linked to the biennial bargaining cycle in Belgium. The strike level is thus noticeably higher in the first semester of uneven years when negotiations usually take place for collective agreements at the industry level (Vandaele 2019a). Transport and logistics, and manufacturing, which often faces restructuring and closures, are the most strike-prone industries. The shares of both the private service and the not-for-profit sector – the latter implying a feminization of the strike weapon – are fairly stable. The only exception is 2010 because of a large strike within the supermarket Carrefour against restructuring plans. This strike together with, for example, the first industry-wide strike in domestic cleaning in 2019 demonstrate that Belgian unions are able to organize industrial action in fragmented industries. Finally, construction is a strike-calm industry except for 2009 when an industry-wide strike – the first since 1968 – was called over a new collective agreement that unions considered too ‘unbalanced’.

Political relations

Belgium’s consociational democracy for accommodating religious and language cleavages has been mirrored in the socio-economic realm via neocorporatist arrangements, oriented equally towards piecemeal policy adjustment. Composed on a parity basis of delegates from the union confederations and main employers’ associations, the NAR/CNT is the most influential social dialogue institution at the national level (De Vos et al. 2003). As Belgium’s ‘social parliament’, the NAR/CNT advises the federal parliament or government on labour and
social security law. Cross-industry collective agreements can also be concluded in the NAR/CNT, and they are almost always extended by Royal Decree. The NAR/CNT together with other collective bargaining arrangements are part of Belgium’s neocorporatist system, traditionally buttressed by the social- and Christian-democratic political parties. Both ‘political families’ historically have ideological and organizational links with the respective confederations, although those alignments have been structurally weakened over time (Faniel and Gobin 2020).

Proportional representation and coalition governments have nevertheless so far provided at least one political party in the federal government with historical ties to the ABVV/FGTB or the ACV/CSC. This partisan leaning largely guarantees the endurance of the neocorporatist system, although electoral shifts alongside labour market reforms are putting pressure on its regulatory capacity. Four interrelated matters linked to those shifts are forcing union organizations to reconsider their strong integration with the political domain.

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20 Party–union links in the ‘liberal family’ were abandoned in 1962, although informal links still exist.
Figure 3.9  Party standing in the Chamber of Representatives since 1999

Source: Federal election results.
First, electoral support is declining for the traditional allies of the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC, especially among the Dutch-language lists in Belgium’s split party system (see Figure 3.9). Consequently, union organizations are also working together with other political parties to represent their members, especially since social- and Christian-democratic parties when in power have promoted labour market reforms and austerity measures which are detrimental to the union agenda. The Flemish social democratic party was closer to ‘Third Way’ policies in the early 2000s. This caused friction with the ABVV/FGTB and internal ethnic-linguistic tensions as the French-speaking sub-structure accused the Flemish one of being too receptive to such policies (Faniel and Gobin 2020). Party–union links were particularly tense during the general strike against the ‘Generational Pact’ aimed at strengthening early retirement schemes in 2005 and later when austerity measures affected the ‘quasi-Ghent system’ in 2011 (Brepoels 2015). Tensions lessened when the social democratic parties went into opposition in 2014, and once they came into power again in 2020. Party–union links can still be considered structural, as illustrated by the fact that the ABVV/FGTB has a seat (in an advisory capacity) on the executive board of the social democratic parties. Some ABVV/FGTB branches, especially in Wallonia, nevertheless favour strengthening relations with the radical left.

Second, the ascent of parties that embrace neoliberalism and thus favour the so-called ‘primacy of politics’ has been colliding with neocorporatist socio-economic decision-making. The Verhofstadt I government (1999–2003, comprising liberal, social democratic and green parties) promoted such a policy but this was quickly abandoned under pressure from the social democratic parties. A drift away from neocorporatism was undeniable under the Michel I government. Little room was left for the ‘social partners’: their advice on relevant policy issues was overruled and several agreements between them became ‘implementation agreements for government decisions’ (Van Gyes et al. 2018: 85). Their autonomy has been restored in the meantime to cope with (un)lockdowns within companies and industries, despite strong government ‘intervention’ during the pandemic (Ajzen and Taskin 2021). Nevertheless, the ACV/CSC has perceived the Flemish Christian Democrats in the Michel I government as unsuccessful in mitigating austerity measures and labour market reforms. Although the reforms seem comparatively modest (Simoni and Vlandas 2020), they have contributed to workplace fissuring. Informal networks still exist between individual Christian Democrats who have sympathies with the Christian labour movement and the ACV/CSC,
especially in Flanders, but the ‘exclusive partnership’ between the confed-
eration and the Christian-democratic party was abandoned in the 1990s.
Green parties are generally perceived as an alternative ally, even though
their standpoints are not always unequivocally pro-union.

Third, the electoral rise of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA, Nieuw-
Vlaamse Alliantie) has made it more difficult to form federal governments,
as illustrated by various periods of caretaker government since 2007
and mounting pressures on Belgian solidarity structures. Initially, this
Flemish pro-independence and conservative party pursued social policies
to promote nation-building in Flanders in the early 2010s (Vandaele and
Hooghe 2013). This swiftly failed because of a shift towards austerity
policies, including skimping on subsidies for civil society organizations
(including unions), in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial and
economic crisis. Advancing a neoliberal agenda and further devolution
puts the N-VA in direct opposition to union organizations, especially as
devolution is synonymous with attempts to sideline social dialogue insti-
tutions in Flanders, despite their stronger neocorporatist underpinning
there than in the other Regions. Further devolution would supposedly
endanger the position of the ‘social partners’ in governance bodies of
the social security system, including the ‘quasi-Ghent system’, which is
still organized primarily at the federal level, as unions nurture solidarity
between all workers in Belgium.

Finally, the electoral gains of the extreme right in Flanders since the
late 1980s have exposed the limits of member–union relations based pre-
dominantly on instrumental motives. The extreme right has made sev-
eral futile attempts to break the quasi-monopoly of confederations by
establishing their own ‘unions’, appointing their own candidates in social
elections or hijacking union symbols such as International Workers’
Day. Social policies aimed at native workers and against migrants have
become more prominent in propaganda. Such welfare chauvinism was
seen as part of the electoral success in 2019. Union organizations try to
counteract the extreme right through union education aimed at union
activists, and anti-racist campaigns. Confederations also jointly adopted
a code of conduct in 1994 permitting them to exclude union representa-
tives who are known to have run as candidates for the extreme right via
union by-laws. This was extended to ordinary members after the 2006
municipal elections. These efforts and union solidarity rhetoric do not
make members immune to the siren calls of the extreme right, however.
There is generally no negative union membership effect when it comes
to voting for them in Belgium compared with other European countries, although middle-class voters are an exception (Mosimann et al. 2019; Oesch 2008).

**Societal power**

Critical or positive support for unions is relatively high, although less so in Flanders, and seems quite stable (Swyngedouw et al. 2016). Their legitimacy is nevertheless regularly contested in the mainstream press and media and by the liberal parties, N-VA and the extreme right. These parties all favour decentralized collective bargaining – a policy preference they share with the Flemish employers’ association VOKA – and replacing the ‘quasi-Ghent system’ with a single state agency. The latter is ironic given their neoliberal or libertarian preferences for ‘free market’ policies. Union organizations sometimes find themselves caught up in a short media storm defending the ‘quasi-Ghent system’: they especially emphasize the cost-efficiency of union-run paying agents compared with the HVW/CAPAC. The abovementioned parties also openly question neocorporatist arrangements, such as the exemption of the ‘union premium’ from taxes, or take any opportunity to delegitimize the unions in relation to financial issues.

Above all, the heightened union mobilization during the Michel I government has given rise to so-called ‘union bashing’ (Zienkowski and De Cleen 2021). The N-VA and extreme right portray union mobilization also in ethnic-linguistic terms, thereby homogenizing Wallonia and disregarding differences in mobilization in Flanders (Abts et al. 2019). No longitudinal empirical data exist to make an assessment on whether such bashing has become more frequent or fierce, or both, although the electoral successes of the N-VA and the extreme right and the ‘primacy of politics’ discourse have certainly fed into this view. Unions’ discursive power has recently become more prominent as mobilization as such has brought only meagre results. Unions keep using leaflets, brochures and paper or (digital) member magazines to inform their members, and traditional media-oriented tactics to influence public opinion. They are also increasingly using social media, although progress can still be made here given the gap between the social media engagement and number of members. Furthermore, unions regularly launch public campaigns targeting specific groups of workers, such as employees in small and medium-sized enterprises, agency workers, women, migrant and student workers, aiming to strengthen their employment terms and conditions. Inspired
by the US ‘Fight for 15’ campaign, one of the most recent campaigns was the ABVV/FGTB-campaign for a ‘decent minimum wage’ to tackle in-work poverty (Flohimont 2019).

Broadening the union agenda beyond the labour market is part of the identity of Belgian union organizations. This is rooted in their ‘pillarized’ past: they fell into a cauldron containing dense networks and union–community collaboration from the outset, and they have remained there via their local branches and union activists. They also forge coalitions with grassroots and progressive movements beyond the own ‘pillar’, proving that institutional embeddedness can go hand in hand with social movement unionism (Pasture 2009). Largely following societal developments, union organizations cooperate with, for instance, non-governmental organizations in international development, the antiracism movement and migrant associations, the environmental and climate movement and the other-globalization movement, anti-austerity and poverty movement. Grassroots and progressive movements can rely on unions’ mobilization capacity, if needed, while coalitional unionism is also often structural and institutionalized. The latter implies that unions as ‘policy insiders’ are often sharing seats with civil society organizations in advisory bodies, especially at subnational levels (Willems et al. 2021).

**Trade union policies towards the European Union**

Belgium is a country that traditionally supports the European integration project, and union organizations are no exception: they subscribe to the supranational logic of the European Trade Union Federations (ETUFs) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), of which the ABVV/FGTB was a founding member.\(^{21}\) The simple geographical fact that Brussels hosts the ETUFs and the ETUC almost naturally provides union organizations with close links.\(^{22}\) Also, the language skills of Belgian union representatives and their occasional migrant

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\(^{21}\) The ACV/CSC joined the ETUC in 1974, after its first enlargement, and the ACLVB/CGSLB in 2002. The ACV/CSC is also member of the European Union of Christian Democratic Workers.

\(^{22}\) Geographical proximity also provides relatively easy access to policymakers at the European level, although influencing decision-making regarding the European Semester is strongly contingent on the federal government coalition (Peña-Casas and Ghallani 2019).
background, and union leadership socialized into finding compromises in a country on the cultural boundary of Germanic and Latin Europe, might facilitate the search for a common understanding in EU organizations (Jouan and Tilly 2017). Bi- and multilateral coordination with unions from neighbouring or other countries is also a strategy advanced by Belgian unions. Thus, the 1996 competitiveness law has indirectly resulted in strengthening wage coordination with unions in two neighbouring countries, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as Luxembourg since 1998 and France since 2002. Although this so-called ‘Doorn initiative’ has faded over time, it inspired the launch of a Committee for the Coordination of Collective Bargaining within the ETUC in 1999.

The only publicly known wrong note in the relationship since 2000 has been the non-participation of the ABVV/FGTB in the 2003 ETUC Congress. While their nominated but not endorsed candidate for the ETUC Secretariat was the immediate cause of this, its roots lay in lingering discord from the early 1990s, when the socialist confederation but also the ACV/CSC stressed the shortage of organizational adaptation of the ever more heterogeneous ETUC and demanded more strategical coherence (Jouan and Tilly 2017). Belgian confederations thenceforward developed a more pragmatic and less prescriptive stance towards the ETUC, but they continue to be at the forefront of defending a ‘social Europe’. Nevertheless, although Belgium was the first country to transform the European Works Council directive into national legislation, there are fewer European Works Councils (EWCs) than one would have expected based on the multinational companies headquartered in Belgium. This is the outcome of the lack of knowledge about EWCs, a low perceived added value of European-level information and consultation, or prioritizing worker representation at the local level (Olijslagers and De Spiegelaere 2019).

Together with their relatively robust membership figures, mobilization capacity and vast resources, Belgian union organizations have been instrumental in organizing European demonstrations or other actions by the ETUFs or ETUC, and are present in relatively large numbers. The effective protests and political advocacy against the Port Directive and the Services Directive in the 2000s have been quintessential in this regard (Leiren and Parks 2014). Judgements by the Court of Justice of the European Union on the Belgian system of recognizing dockworkers remain an enduring concern for transport unions, however. Also, in coordination with unions from Central and Eastern Europep, the
Inter-Regional Trade Union Councils, ETUFs or ETUC – in particular, unions organizing in construction, food processing and transport – have increased their efforts to better regulate the free movement of workers and tackle ‘social dumping’ in the EU (Jouan and Tilly 2017). Like increased national labour market deregulation and flexibility, liberalization and ‘social dumping’ have contributed to workplace fissuring, tending to undermine Belgium’s neocorporatist arrangements and their regulatory capacity. Recent initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Labour Authority or the European minimum wage are therefore all welcomed by the Belgian union organizations.

**Conclusions**

It is probably no coincidence that Belgium is referred to in a recent book on how to rejuvenate the American labour movement (Madland 2021): Belgian union organizations have somehow ‘unawares’ incorporated many US-inspired ideas on unionism considered vital for a vibrant labour movement. They combine robust embeddedness in labour market and welfare institutions, political advocacy strategies and litigation with some organizing tactics, although almost solely related to social elections, and strong union mobilization, featuring a wide action repertoire. Their ‘pillarized’ past is resilient within the framework of today’s coalitional and community unionism within and beyond their ‘pillar’ and a ‘whole-worker approach’ that goes beyond the workplace and a solely economic focus, especially via local branches and the inclusion of, for instance, students, the unemployed and pensioners as members. All of this has arguably contributed to a high and exceptionally longstanding stable union density rate until 2014 demonstrating how Belgian unions kept membership levels in line with the growth of wage- and salary-earners, and compositional shifts within it.

A ‘belated’ de-unionization has nevertheless set in, which has adversely affected union revenue. No academic studies have yet examined the reasons for recent membership losses, and the extent to which membership in- or outflows, or both, are causing this. But young workers in particular

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23 One exception to negative integration might be EU policies promoting formal gender equality and integration of women in the labour market, with gender equality provisions being adopted in cross-industry collective agreements and IPA/AIPs over time (Lemeire and Zanoni 2021).
are clearly a growing concern, as also shown by their decreasing participation rate in social elections. Membership dynamics in the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC have gone together with more member concentration, less union fragmentation and a reconfiguration of internal relationships between affiliates. For example, the ABVV/FGTB undergoing internal alliance-building; weakening metal unions are cooperating with the transport union that has growing membership. Industry unions joining forces with multi-industry ones has been another way of reinforcing their influence, in terms of which white-collar unions in particular are – relatively – losing ground. Thus, mergers are typically an organizational response of ACV/CSC affiliates in industries mainly with declining employment and confronted with sustained membership decline.

In terms of Visser’s (2019) four future union scenarios, although based solely on the union membership dimension, substitution is unlikely in the near future. This scenario would also imply a weakening of the quasi-monopoly of the three confederations. Belgian unions are simply too large, and there are no rival organizations or institutions. The considerable influx into the HVW/CAPAC of ‘temporary unemployed workers’ as a result of the Covid-19 furlough scheme demonstrates how certain worker categories are ‘union evasive’, however. Unions’ comprehensive nature, with identities and strategies emphasizing inclusiveness, not only calls into question insider/outsider models of behaviour, but also excludes outspoken dualization and marginalization scenarios for now. Unions are simply still strong among their traditional membership bases, although dualization tendencies could develop if they do too little to recruit among growing new worker categories, either at the lower or the higher end of the labour market. In this respect, labour market reforms and the influence of EU policies on Belgium’s neocorporatist arrangements and employment relations are not very helpful as they contribute to workplace fissuring.

A rapid and pronounced decline in union membership would result in marginalization, which would probably be generated by imperilling unions’ institutionally based security, especially the ‘quasi-Ghent system’. This security remains largely intact as the traditional political allies of union organizations are still electorally strong enough to veto destabilizing policy proposals that would impact directly on union security. Governments largely respected neocorporatist traditions of social dialogue before the 2007–2008 financial and economic crisis. Political advocacy and union mobilization have at best only weakened the tightening
of (early) pension arrangements and labour market reforms, however. Equally, political mass strikes demonstrated their limitations during the Michel I government. For union organizations it was a matter of ‘sweating it out’. The Michel I government’s legacy is clear, however: a restricted right to take industrial action in certain industries, more labour market deregulation and flexibility, undermining the neocorporatist system’s regulatory capacity, and a collective bargaining system increasingly typified by state ‘intervention’ in wage-setting, wage restraint and fragmentation.

There might be reasons for some positivity in the wake of the pandemic. The De Croo government, which came to power in 2020 and includes economic liberals, socialists, the greens and Flemish Christian Democrats, mainly subscribes to neocorporatist traditions. Equally, resuming union growth also seems to imply a return to ‘normal’, with net union density, in all likelihood, having again risen above the symbolic level of 50 per cent since 2020. It would perhaps be too much to claim that this return to a more open political opportunity structure and renewed membership increase has set the unions on the road to revitalization, however. Easier trade union access to socio-economic decision-making might only amount to a temporary reprieve until the next elections. Also, one-off pandemic-related growth should not blind the unions to the underlying weakening of membership. The ‘quasi-Ghent system’ is therefore a double-edged sword for unions. It provides them with an almost ‘automatic’ inflow of members. Conversely, the unions might also be ‘giants with feet of clay’, with large memberships but weak organizational power, reducing their effectiveness, especially if their relationships with (unemployed) newcomers and existing members are predominantly instrumental (Vandaele 2020a). Unless the unions engage seriously with organizing, especially in new industries, with the aim of increasing union effectiveness in the workplace and beyond, all of this points to a continuation of the Belgian Sonderweg rather than clear-cut union revitalization.

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All links were checked on 6 April 2022.

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Belgium: Coping and opposing of trade unions


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**Abbreviations**

Some organizations or institutions also have an official name in Belgium’s third official language, German. These are omitted here for reasons of space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABVV/FGTB</td>
<td>Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond/Fédération générale du travail de Belgique (General Federation of Belgian Labour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC/CG</td>
<td>Algemene Centrale/Centrale Générale (General Workers Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACOD/CGSP</td>
<td>Algemene Centrale der Openbare Diensten/Centrale Générale des Services Publics (General Union of Public Services)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Belgium: Coping and opposing of trade unions**

**ACLVB/CGSLB** Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België/Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique (General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium)

**ACV COC** Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond Christelijke Onderwijscentrale (Christian Education Federation–Flemish)

**ACV COV** Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond Christelijk Onderwijzersverbond (Christian Union Federation of Teachers–Flemish)

**ACV/CSC** Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond/Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (Confederation of Christian Trade Unions)

**BBTK/Setca** Bond van Bedienden, Technici en Kaderleden/Syndicat des Employés, Techniciens et Cadres (Union of Clerical, Technical and Supervisory Staff of Belgium)

**BTB/UBT** Belgische Transportbond/Union Belge du Transport (Belgian Union of Transport Workers)

**CRB/CCE** Centrale Raad voor het Bedrijfsleven/Conseil central de l’économie (Central Economic Council)

**CSC CCPET** Confédération des syndicats chrétiens Centrale chrétienne du personnel de l’enseignement (Christian Union of Staff in Technical Colleges–francophone)

**CSC CEMNL** Confédération des syndicats chrétiens Centrale de l’enseignement moyen et normal libre (Christian Union Federation in Free Secondary and Primary Education–francophone)

**CSC FIC** Confédération des syndicats chrétiens Fédération des instituteurs chrétiens (Christian Union Federation of Teachers–francophone)

**CSC CNE** Confédération des syndicats chrétiens Centrale nationale des employés (National Union of Employees–francophone)
CSC UCEO  Confédération des syndicats chrétiens
Union chrétienne des membres du personnel de l’enseignement officiel (Christian Union Federation of Staff in Public Education–francophone)

EU  European Union

EWCs  European Works Councils

FOD WASO/SPF ETCS  Federale Overheidsdienst Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Sociaal Overleg/Service public fédéral Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale (Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue)

HORVAL  Centrale van de Voeding, Horeca & Diensten/Centrale Alimentation, Horeca & Services (Union of Workers in Food Production, Hotels and Services)

H VW/CAPAC  Hulpkas voor werkloosheidsuitkeringen/Caisse auxiliaire de Paiement des Allocations de Chômage (Branch Office for Unemployment Benefits)

IPA / AIP  interprofessioneel akkoord/accord interprofessional (interprofessional agreement)

NAR/CNT  Nationale Arbeidsraad/Conseil national du travail (National Labour Council)

NCK/CNC  Nationale Confederatie van het Kaderpersoneel/Confédération nationale des cadres (National Confederation of Staff)

N-VA  Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (New Flemish Alliance)

TKD/TVD  Centrale voor Textiel, Kleding en Diamant/Centrale du Textile, Vêtement et Diamant (Textiles-Clothing-Diamant)