For a hundred years now, the Belgian Transport Workers’ Union has been battling for workers’ rights, ever since it was founded in 1913. In this brief overview, we will look at some of the most memorable struggles of this period, in order not to forget where we came from, where we are now and where we want to be tomorrow. And let us keep in mind the words spoken by our former president Louis Major, son of an Ostend fisherman: ‘There is nothing stronger than a man who knows he is right.’

FURTHER INFORMATION

ODIS, the online database specialising in the history of Belgium, boasts over five hundred articles on the history of the Belgian Transport Workers’ Union. The following website address will take you directly to the main article on the BTB: [http://btb.amsab.be](http://btb.amsab.be). Use the hyperlinks on this page to find out about the BTB’s forerunners, umbrella organisations, sections, publications, bureau members and activities. Happy reading!
BTB 100
Ten key moments in the history of the Belgian Transport Workers’ Union
Introduction

‘Measured in time of transport and communication’, a Noble Prize winner once stated, ‘the whole round globe is now smaller than a small European country was a hundred years ago.’ But also: ‘When the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century brought a rapid increase in wealth, the demand of workers for a fair share of the wealth they were creating was conceded only after riots and strikes.’ Transport workers have a deeply ingrained sense of pride. Whether we are sailors, bargemen, dockers, truck drivers, logisticians or removal men, we take a pride in our work. None of us would be happy working in a factory. We are the people that make the world go round and enable factories to manufacture products, which we then deliver to the shops. If we stopped all work at the ports, the entire country would grind to a halt. But we are also vulnerable, as our work is highly irregular, like our earnings, as well as heavy and dangerous. This explains why our predecessors fought for effective protection, job security, safety in the workplace and their own status. We still continue to fight – against big business, which only aims to make profit and treats workers like objects; against a Europe far too liberal to our liking, against conservative governments and racist parties, and sometimes even against ourselves, if ever we become complacent or too hasty in our decisions. For a hundred years now, the Belgian Transport Workers’ Union has been battling for workers’ rights, ever since it was founded in 1913. In this brief overview, we will look at some of the most memorable struggles of this period, in order not to forget where we came from, where we are now and where we want to be tomorrow. And let us keep in mind the words spoken by our former president Louis Major, son of an Ostend fisherman: ‘There is nothing stronger than a person who knows he is right.’ Happy reading, comrade!

Antwerp, September 2013

Ivan Victor
President of the btb
1907
Lock-out at the Port of Antwerp!

Arthur Wieme is a happy man. It is June 1907, and his dockers’ union Willen is Kunnen (To Want Is To Be Able To) is preparing for its first major confrontation with the port management. Who would have believed it possible, when Wieme, who ran a pub near the docks in Antwerp, decided once again three years before, in 1904, to try and set up a socialist dockers’ union. ‘Once again’ we say, as forming a union the past twenty years has been tried so many times that he lost count. The first meeting is held in the docks of Antwerp, in a humble small pub, yet still big enough to accommodate the ten dockers that turn up. After a few passionate speeches, seven of them join the new trade union – seven out of twenty thousand dockers. Of course, it’s still better than nothing.

Six months later, the union still only has seven members, and the situation has become desperate. Arthur Wieme seeks advice from Jan Bartels, leader of the powerful diamond worker’s union of Antwerp. Bartels’ advice is to remain neutral, stay away from ideology, and focus on the daily and practical needs of the dockers. No sooner said than done. Bartels himself takes charge of the union as its president, and membership numbers rise to a few hundred. However, the next two years the figures stagnate again. Then, in 1906, the Belgian Workers’ Party (BWP) launches a campaign aimed at revitalising its trade union wing. Wieme decides to jump on the BWP bandwagon, encouraged by Jan Chapelle, a flamboyant
member of the Antwerp socialist movement. Union president Bartels obviously does not agree, but is being overthrown in a turbulent meeting in December 1906, and replaced by Chapelle. Joining the SVP proves to be the turning point for Willen is Kunnen, which boasts over 4,000 members within a few months. Jan Chapelle takes a deep breath: it is now time to take up the fight.

The needs of the Antwerp dockers are great. Today, it is difficult to picture the abominable conditions to which dockworkers are subjected during this period. Dock work is characterised by a day-to-day contract system, with dockers being recruited for one day at a time. They meet in foremen's pubs, or on a square nicknamed The Lazy Corner, or near by the so-called nations (warehouse companies). There is frequent abuse, with foremen accepting payment in return for jobs, or recruiting dockers only if they spend enough in their cafés. It is a hard and rough life – dockers are selected without distinction, those who run the fastest or use their fists to push their way to the front are the ones that get the job. The dockers are part of a shifting group of mostly unqualified workers, joined by employment seekers from the countryside, who come to the port by tram or train. As an inevitable consequence, this leads to extreme competition between workers and terrifyingly low wages.

In June 1907, Willen is Kunnen brings things to a head. Jan Chapelle is a slick operator, he has no choice, with only four thousand members, less than a quarter of all dockworkers. First a so-called survey on wage demands is being organised – to which the relevant workers obviously agree – that plants the seed of rebellion in their minds. Chapelle then takes the strategic decision to steer clear of calling a general strike. Instead, he opts to organise strikes for the different professional categories, starting with the grain unloaders, so that workers who are not on strike can support their striking colleagues. Moreover, this way there is constant pressure on the solidarity between the bosses, as only some of them at any given time are confronted with striking workers.

On Sunday 16 June 1907, there is a street manifestation of the dockers, after which two thousand grain unloaders take up the fight by refusing to unload any grain. After a few days, the grain starts rotting in the holds of the ships. Under pressure, mainly from Antwerp's hotel, café and restaurant sector, some bosses give way to the workers' demands and pay the higher wages. The first battle has been won! Encouraged by the successful strike of the grain unloaders, Chapelle launches a second round, now demanding full teams. Stevedores are often paid for full teams, but then hire two, three or even four men less and pocket the rest of the money.

But this time it is the bosses' turn to flex their muscles. The Shipping Federation decides to make large-scale use of scab labour. The Cambroman transports hundreds of blackleg English workers to the Port of Antwerp, despite Chapelle and Schonkeren from the Antwerp Union of Seamen paying a visit to London, in an effort to dissuade the workers from running with the wolves. The situation now becomes very tense. On 8 August, the Mayor of Antwerp calls a conciliation meeting. After a few attempts, Willen is Kunnen agrees to a compromise, on the condition that the blacklegs leave Antwerp. But by that time, there are already 2,800 English strike breakers working on 199 ships. The bosses now announce a general lock-out: unconditional abandoning of all demands or no more job at the docks... The strike continues, but takes a violent turn, with the vans transporting the English blacklegs to the Cambroman repeatedly being attacked and pelted with stones. The police opens fire, piles of wood are set alight, and protestors take to the streets of Antwerp. But all this to no avail, despite the major financial support given to the striking Antwerp dockers by the socialist movement from all over the country (at one point, the dockers of Ghent even send a pig). Willen is Kunnen is forced to bring it to an end after eight long weeks. Its coffers are empty, while the bosses continue to pay good money to the blacklegs. After another conciliation proposal from the Mayor, Willen is Kunnen convenes its members and asks them, with a heavy heart, to call off the strike and return to work. On 14 October 1907, the reform commission proposed by the Mayor goes to work, and in the next few months some modest concessions are granted to the dockers. But it is clear that the battle has been lost.

Yet, all things considered, the 1907 strike is to mark a turning point. The bosses are playing it unusually hard, they not only want to break the strike, what they are really targeting is Willen is Kunnen itself. This is how it had gone in 1899, when they destroyed its predecessor the Kruiskensbond (Union of the Small Crosses), through a lock-out with English strike breakers. There is a silent agreement between the Antwerp Shipping Federation and its English and German shareholders: that no trade unions will be tolerated at Europe's ports. The use of mostly incompetent scab labour over such a long period had cost a small fortune, but the end had justified the means: break the trade union at any cost. And yet, what no one would have believed, happens: Willen is Kunnen is not broken and rises again. The union is in a weary state, of course, and loses a lot of its members, but Wieme and Chapelle – backed up by a now well organised local socialist movement in Antwerp – take hold of the reins, organise a system for collecting subscriptions, merge sections that are too small to be viable, and ensure that the union will survive. For the first time in twenty years, a socialist dockers' union has survived a strike. From now on, the bosses at the Port of Antwerp will have to reckon with a tenacious and militant adversary.
A national union is formed

Broadly speaking, two types of workers can be found at the Port of Antwerp – those who work on-board ships (sailors, officers, enginemen, stokers, etc.) and those working at the port, loading and unloading ships. Among them, the dockers are the largest group shortly before the First World War. Even if it is difficult to arrive at a precise figure, there are probably 12,000 to 15,000 of them. In Antwerp, they are represented by a series of politicised trade unions, including the socialist union Willen is Kunnen (To Want Is To Be Able To), led by Jan Chapelle, which is by far the largest. Dockers are traditionally attached to one specific port, but a powerful dockers’ union exists in Ghent too, as well as smaller groups in Ostend and Nieuwpoort.

Sailors are less attached to a single port, their orientation is national and even international. Many ships flying the Belgian flag have crews of foreign origin, while many Belgian sailors serve on ships belonging to foreign owners. This makes it difficult to determine their number, though conservative estimates put the figure at around five thousand sailors in the Belgian merchant navy fleet in 1910. Sailors are difficult to organise, because they spend most of their time at sea and are thus hard to contact – radios become compulsory on board ships only after the First World War. However, in 1907, the socialists manage to set up a more or less permanent Belgian Union of Seamen, led by Christ Mahlman from the Antwerp socialist movement. The union’s main office is located at the Port of Antwerp, but smaller groups also exist at the ports of Ghent and Ostend, though the sailors are closely collaborating with the dockers’ unions in these places.

In 1910, many trades that are later to become part of the BTB have not yet been organised, at least not as viable organisations. For fishermen and boatmen, as well as for the so-called merchant navy officers, lasting unions will see the light only after the First World War. However, in 1910, there is one category for which attempts are made to develop trade union activities, that of the drivers, also known as land transport workers. This very mixed group includes carters, who transport primary materials and products for major manufacturing companies, as well as apprentice brewers, who supply the cafés with barrels of beer, carriers who wait for travellers outside railway stations and even – during this period of the early motor car – car chauffeurs who, in their handsome uniforms, drive their masters’ heavy cars. In theory, the people working on the trams, including drivers and
At the beginning of the twentieth century, Camille Huysmans, in his thirties, dynamic and ambitious, moves from Limburg to Brussels to work for the Belgian socialist movement. In 1905, he is named secretary of the Second International, which brings him into contact with all the different forms of socialist activity that exist in the world. He is quickly impressed by the way the German trade union movement is organised. Huysmans then attempts to introduce this model in Belgium, which is, in short, based on the difference between a federated and a central union. A federation is a more or less free type of association, in which several organisations agree to work together, while hanging onto their own statutes, secretaries, journals and membership fees. It can therefore happen that two, three or even four unions conclude individual and different agreements with the management of the same factory (or that the single voluntary militant who takes care of the finances runs off with the cash). In contrast, a centralised trade union, or centrale in French and Dutch, is a type of central association with a rigid structure, in which the relevant groups merge to form a single organisation. A centralised trade union has the same statutes, a single head office, one single journal, and its member subscriptions are centrally managed. Ideally, a centralised trade union should not be organised by profession, but by economic sector, so that only one union exists in each domain. According to Huysmans, together with the Belgian Workers’ Party and its Trade Union Advisory Committee, this enables a union to go beyond the individual interests of a single profession, so that workers can fight the capitalist system as a class. From 1905 on, Huysmans attempts to persuade the Belgian trade unions to make the change from a federal structure to a centralised organisation, backed by an official appeal of the Trade Union Advisory Committee in 1909. Of course, the major existing union organisations are reluctant to relinquish their rights in this way, but small unions, struggling to survive, are greatly interested.

We do not know whether it is this broader context that inspires Christ Mahlman to send a letter to the dockers’ union and the land transport workers’ union early in 1913, suggesting that they merge with his Union of Seamen. The two unions respond positively to his proposal and from this time onwards, the dockers’, seafarers’ and drivers’ unions begin to work together as part of a larger structure, intended to unite the entire transport sector in Belgium. Not surprisingly, of course, initially things go slow. On 11 May 1913, representatives from the three unions meet for the first time in Brussels. After a further meeting in June, they decide to organise the founding congress of the Belgian Transport Workers’ Union in Ghent on 6 July 1913. But the new centralised union does not get started immediately, there is a lot of money involved, and the founding congress focuses specifically on who is going to pay for what, and who is going to be in the board. Eleven professional groups attend the founding congress, but not all of them are capable of paying subscriptions. It is agreed that for the time being a scale of three types of subscription will be used, until all the professional groups have had the opportunity to bring their member subscriptions into line. In terms of composition of the bureau, it is agreed it will be composed by representatives of provincial districts. But Antwerp is highly dominant, with six out of the new centralised union’s eight thousand members coming from this central district.

At first, the Antwerp branch is the only branch to have more than one thousand members. In order to help solve problems carriers are facing in Brussels? In order to understand this, it is necessary to look at the broader context of Belgian trade unionism, which brings us, curiously enough, to the subject of Camille Huysmans.

At many places in the country, attempts are made to organise the drivers. In 1911, groups exist in almost all the industrial towns, including Brussels, Liège, Seraing, La Louvière, Ghent and Antwerp. But viability is a huge problem, so the drivers take the initiative of forming a national trade union organisation and create the National Union of Land Transport Workers, which claims to have a thousand members. In the same year, Christ Mahlman achieves the unimaginable feat of organising a sailors’ strike with the Union of Seamen! After the ship owners have made some small concessions in terms of pay and working hours, the Belgian Union of Seamen has become an established part of the Belgian merchant navy. The union has the wind in its sails and its membership increases to over two thousand, which enables Mahlman to act as its permanent secretary.

This is what the Belgian transport sector looks like in 1912. Alongside a few small groups, such as the train drivers, three major trade union organisations exist: the Union of Seamen, Willen is Kunnen of the dockers, and the National Union of Land Transport Workers. Each of these three unions has sufficient members to be viable. For example, Willen is Kunnen employs seven people, and is organising a permanent membership management. But then, why do these unions decide to merge and form a single organisation? Why do they abandon the existing structures and take on the task of explaining, for example, to a docker in Ghent that he should go on strike, in order to help solve problems carriers are facing in Brussels? In order to understand this, it is necessary to look at the broader context of Belgian trade unionism, which brings us, curiously enough, to the subject of Camille Huysmans.
province. When the Btb officially commences its activities as a centralised national union on 1 October 1913, two out of the three permanent secretaries come from the Port of Antwerp: Arthur Wieme of the dockers’ union and Christ Mahlman of the seafarers’ union. The position of third permanent secretary remains vacant because the former National Union of Land Transport Workers does not immediately find an appropriate candidate.

But this does not stop the Belgian Transport Workers’ Union to enthusiastically set off to work. In December, its representatives attend the annual congress of the Trade Union Advisory Committee of the Belgian Workers’ Party, thus confirming from the outset its allegiance to the socialist movement. Christ Mahlman works from the offices of De Werker (The Worker), the newspaper of the socialist movement in Antwerp, and launches the new union’s own journal, first appearing early in 1914 under the title De Transportarbeider (The Transport Worker). During the first year of its existence, the union actively seeks to extend its activities and increase its membership. Throughout the country, and especially in the south, it attempts to create new sections, such as in Jemappes, or to unite existing groups of dockers, sailors and drivers, such as in Ghent. Of a French edition of the trade union newspaper 750 copies are distributed. In Brussels in January 1914, the new union experiences its first conflict, with the powerful steelworkers’ union. Drivers from the Brussels company Autos-Taxis, who are on strike, want to join the steelworkers’ union. The Brussels section of the Btb reacts immediately and distributes a pamphlet, calling for the strikers to join the Btb instead. Understandably, the steelworkers are not very happy with this, and the Trade Union Advisory Committee is asked to intervene. In April, it decides that the drivers have to join the Btb, but a considerable number of drivers by then has already left the union in disgust. The Btb also begins to recruit boatmen as members, when it manages to convince a small and still very new association of Antwerp boatmen to pay a contribution to the national union. During summer 1914, the newly centralised union suffers a heavy blow, when its permanent secretary, Christ Mahlman, is sentenced to eighteen months of imprisonment for the trade union action that he has led two years before with the Belgian Union of Seamen.

A little later, the union suffers an even heavier blow, when the German army crosses the Belgian border in August, thus starting the Great War. The First World War not only wipes away Christ Mahlman’s prison sentence, but also paralyses all the new national union’s activities for four years. When, in 1918, the secretaries with great difficulty convene the first trade union meetings again, they are forced to acknowledge that they will have to start again from scratch. This marks the dawn of a new, but also a very different era.
Bullets are flying all around, skimming the command post, making holes in the walls, shattering the windows. From the corner of his eye, Captain Blondé sees one of his sailors collapse, but to surrender, no no no, never. Determined, he steers his fishing boot, the Belgian O 130 Raymon, towards the German U-boat, which desperately fires one salvo after the other. On a crash course, knowing that his solid little fishing boat will prove to be less vulnerable than the submarine. Finally, the Germans decide to play it safe and leave the scene. Blondé now moves towards the steamboat ss Morwenna, which he has come to rescue, as it is already sinking. The crew from Ostend saves the lives of over thirty men, safely returning them to the British coast.

Arsène Blondé, sea dog, stubborn Fleming from the Belgian coast, and trade unionist. Already an experienced and valued fisherman in 1914, when confronted with the violence of war, he flees to England. While there, he can see the trade unions in action: strikes are on (and won!), a Union of Seamen is founded. Blondé acts as its spokesman. He is still doing that after the war, back in Ostend, when as captain of his ship he refuses to set sail while the seamen are on strike. The result of that: fired, captain no more.

Now what? The Ostend Union of Seamen turns to an old friend in Ghent, who has proven in the past to care about the fate of the Belgian fishermen. Edward ‘father’ Anseele, who is leading a socialist business empire in Ghent, had already made a suggestion before: if the ship owners refused to give in, then why not create a shipping company of our own? A trade union delegation from Ostend, including Arsène Blondé, pays
Anseele in Ghent a visit, and a deal is struck. In 1921, a new company sees the light: the Oostendsche Rederij (Ostend Shipping Company). Anseele wastes no time, buys two trailers, enthusiastically welcomed by thousands of Ostend workers in September 1921, and immediately buys another three, so that the new company in its first year of existence already owns a fleet of five ships. The Red Fleet has arrived!

Of course this is a bold venture – a socialist trade union aiming to beat the bosses at their own game – but the Red Fleet meets with considerable commercial success. By 1926, with almost twenty ships in circulation and employing over three hundred people. The Union of Seamen, strongly dominating the new shipping company, uses its position to trigger a social upheaval in the Belgian fishing sector. The Red Fleet workers are the first to benefit from insurance against accidents at work, high quality food when on board ship and (far) higher wages. The fishermen are literally queuing up ‘to work for the union’. In this way, the Red Fleet forces other ship owners to offer similar benefits.

After a few years, the ship owners slowly begin to move. A mutual insurance fund is created, a supply company and a consumers’ cooperative. Anseele gradually begins to dream of what could be achieved: the Red Fleet should put fish on the table of every working Belgian family, thus improving living conditions for the entire population, and creating a world of workers’ children sparkling with health and fed with bread from the Vooruit (Forward, the cooperative of the Ghent socialist movement) and fish from the Red Fleet.

But things turn out differently. In 1929, the stock exchanges crash and the entire world is plunged into the Great Depression. The Labour Bank too, one of the Red Fleet’s money suppliers, goes bankrupt, in 1934. During the 1930s, the company manages to keep its head above water, but only through great efforts. It has to sell a large part of its fleet, and the Union of Seamen loses control over the management board. After the Second World War, the situation is not getting any better. Steamboats, in 1920 still cutting-edge technology, taking over from sailing ships, are now in their turn being replaced by fishermen’s longboats equipped with diesel engines. There is no money to renew the fleet, and in 1951 the Oostendsche Rederij goes bankrupt.

For the Union of Seamen, at that moment, it does not make much difference anymore: the shipping company, after a twenty year period of struggling to survive commercially, has lost its identity as a red fleet. And really, it does not matter much anymore, trade union strategic policies are no longer aimed at building a counter economy, but at the negotiating tables of the social dialogue. From 1945 onwards, the social security system is slowly but surely being extended to cover fishermen and sailors: they get stable incomes, insurance against accidents, pensions, regulations on working hours, etc.

And for the fishermen too, it hardly makes any difference anymore: fish is now being imported from further afield, the Belgian fishing sector is gradually declining, despite technological innovations such as the introduction of diesel engines and synthetic fibre nets. When the IJslandvaart (long distance fishing in Icelandic waters) disappears from the 1950s on, Ostend has to surrender its title of leading Belgian fishing port to Zeebrugge. Only a few fishermen remain by then: of over two thousand Belgian fishermen in the 1930s, 1800 remain in 1955, the number falling to 900 in 1980. Between 1955 and 2010, the number of fishing boats declines from over four hundred to less than hundred.

In March 1952, the O 148 Captain Arsène Blondé – which has now been sold to a German ship owner and is sailing under its new name Thor – is hit by black ice, the formation of ice on the ship’s superstructure, during a fishing trip in the Far North. The ship won’t hold, it capsizes and sinks. Thus they come and they go, R.I.P Red Fleet 1921-1951, but the social benefits that have been conquered continue to this day.
The General Strike

Within a few years after the First World War, Antwerp becomes one of the world’s biggest ports. On the north side of the town, several new docks are added to the port, including the huge Hanza dock in 1928, directly accessible from the north section of the Scheldt via the Kruisschans lock, equally enormous by the standards of the time. The trade unions too are experiencing exponential growth. While the Btb has less than 5,000 members at the start of the war, the number has risen to 25,000 in 1919. That is a direct result of the government’s policy of allowing the unions as unemployment funds, leading to new members joining on a massive scale. The red union is dominant at the Port of Antwerp. A census conducted in 1919 reveals that the Btb has three times more members among the dockworkers than the Christian union. The latter are constantly complaining about red-or-no-bread practices, foremen and stevedores being pressurised by over-zealous socialist dockers to drive out workers belonging to the Christian union.

Immediately after the First World War, the Port of Antwerp is facing a huge labour shortage. The dockers are constantly calling strikes, and they usually get what they are after. This helps to understand why, in 1919, the employers agree to step in on one of the first joint committees, the National Committee of the Port of Antwerp. Despite an initial lack of trust from both sides, the consultation committee soon appears to be functioning effectively. The dockworkers are quickly awarded a number of major pay rises, while their wages become index-linked in 1923.

When, in the summer of 1928, three dockers are riding their bikes past the ships, calling out to the workers to stop working, ‘as the stevedores are refusing to pay a wage increase’, the dockers, to the surprise of many, are actually prepared to follow. This wildcat strike comes as a major embarrassment for the Btb at the national com-
mittee. On top of that, the three rogue cyclists turn out to be members of the local communist cell. However, the union at this point has not yet sunk deep enough into the comfort of the negotiation seats, in order not to realise that indexation alone is not enough. There is too much uncertainty in the life of a docker: anyone can be a docker, often you can find a job no more than four times a week, or even three times, while being paid in cafés leads to various swindles and abuses … ‘Who can deny that never being certain of finding work and constantly failing to bring home enough money for your wife and children leads to bitterness? When hunger reigns, no one cares about respecting contracts. You cannot reason with hunger!’

After four days, at a meeting on 21 June, the BTB regains control of the strike. With the help of the provincial governor the strike is called off three weeks later, but not without some serious concessions. From now on, dockers are required to register and can no longer get work without showing a pay book. The book shows their status: A for regular workers – who are given priority – and B for casual workers. The dockworker has taken his first step towards achieving recognition and therefore a secure livelihood.

But the war is far from being over. It soon emerges that employers pay little attention to the pay book and are still arbitrarily taking on the cheapest workers. On top of this, there is a stock exchange crash a year later, in 1929, leading to dark years of economic depression, which results in massive unemployment at the Port of Antwerp. Even before, in the good years, a docker barely could get an average of four working days per week, many times even no more than three. In 1933, unemployment at the Port of Antwerp reaches eight thousand, compared to three thousand in 1930. In a situation like that, employers are in the strongest possible position, and trade unions can barely achieve anything.

While at the Port of Ghent a docker quota is successfully introduced, in Antwerp workers continue to be recruited without pay books. To crown it all, the index falls and a series of pay cuts follows. The BTB can do nothing but try to keep its followers calm, while casting a worried glance at its communist rivals: ‘Discipline and more discipline – this must be our motto. Do not be misled by the wheeling and dealing of a few irresponsible hotheads.’

Yet in 1936 hell breaks loose, and without any warning the events of 1928 are repeated. In an odd way, it is the BTB itself that triggers the action. In May 1936, during an election campaign, there is a violent encounter of a socialist and an extreme right-wing campaigning team on the streets of Antwerp. Shots are fired and two socialists, Albert Pot and Theofiel Grijp, are killed. The latter used to be a militant BTB member, and in response to this event, on 26 May, the transport union calls for a 24-hour strike at the Port of Antwerp. This is the first strike at the port for many years. Is it a coincidence when, one week later, the spark catches the gunpowder and some discontent dockers refuse to go to work? The BTB tries to calm things down, but gets completely run over. The next morning, on 3 June 1936, thousands of striking dockers gather before the BTB seat on the Paardenmarkt square. Just like in 1928, the union acts quickly and firmly. A giant sports hall is hired for a meeting, and that same evening ten thousand strikers hear the BTB’s president, Frans Daems, declare that he ‘would have preferred to have it the other way’, but would still back up the strike.

The Port of Antwerp is thus brought to a standstill. Demands are less concerned with pay increases than in 1928. This time, the focus is mainly on protection against abuses and unemployment, including recruitment in fixed offices, work only for approved dockworkers, definition of port areas, and full 13-man teams. The employers are not really impressed, given the surplus labour available during this crisis period. They refuse to enter into any discussion and call for an immediate return to work. But the BTB remains confident and stands by its demands – it is time to put an end, once and for all, to years of abuse committed by the employers.

In mid-1936, the political and social situation in Belgium is particularly tense. After years of economic crisis and unemployment, the extreme right and extreme left make progress, both in the streets and, after the May 1936 elections, in parliament. The Van Zeeland government falls immediately after the elections. It is going to be particularly difficult to form a government. Then, a few days later, when the wildcat strike breaks out at the Port of Antwerp on 2 June – amid rumours that communist agitation is involved – this immediately becomes a matter of national importance. On 9 June, the miners of Liège join in on the port strike, soon followed by the rest of the country. On 11 June, Van Zeeland fails in forming a new government. He asks to surrender his mandate but then, on 13 June, finally succeeds in forming a government, including six socialist ministers. On 15 June, the unions call a general strike. On 17 June, the government organises the first national labour conference in the country’s history. The demands placed on the table by the workers are truly historic: a national minimum wage, the 40-hour week, annual leave and family allowances. Only after most of these demands are met, and the ministers involved have introduced the first bills, from 22 June 1936 onwards, the strike gradually comes to an end.

At the Port of Antwerp, the strike has already ended on 20 June, when the strikers agree to a significant wage increase. A year later, the 40-hour week and 7-hour day are introduced at the port, as a direct result of the strike. The year 1936 will be remembered in the annals as the year in which the first steps are taken towards the future social security system.
Becu heaves a sigh, his hand hovering for a moment over the paper. He has just written a piece for the journal published by his International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), a report on a mission to Africa, aimed at supporting the local transport workers’ unions. It has been a difficult trip, confronting all this racism and colonialism was shocking and stunning. The ITF wants to help the African trade unions, but Becu is under no illusions and writes that: ‘That will not be an easy task, for the African has a natural distrust of the white man, born of long and unpleasant experience.’

Omer Becu, son of a primary school teacher from Ostend, becomes a sailor, then embarks on an impressive career in the international trade union world. In the 1930s, he is active in the international union of navy officers in Antwerp. During the Second World War, he makes a name for himself in the fight against the Nazis, by working closely with the American secret service – for which the British union is later to reproach him bitterly. After the war, he is founding father of the renewed Belgian socialist trade union, with Louis Major and others, before joining the ITF board. In 1950, he is appointed president of the international transport workers’ union, which he leads with a firm hand. In 1960, he reaches the summit when he is asked to lead the world’s biggest trade union confederation: the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). No other Belgian trade union leader has ever held a higher position.

His African project gets underway in 1957. It comes as a response to an ITF resolution of 1954, which
calls for action against colonialism. Becu needs not to be convinced, he is deeply dis-
gusted by racial discrimination, ever since he has seen how black dockers are treated,
as a young sailor on a cargo ship on the Mississippi in New Orleans in 1920: ‘One day,
I saw how a black dockworker disappeared while cereals were being loaded. It was not
allowed to search for him for long, as time was money. His decomposed body was later
found under the cereals, during unloading in Antwerp. I was not able to eat any bread for
the following few days.’ One of his predecessors, Edo Fimmen, ITF president in between
wars and Becu’s mentor, has kept hammering for years at the necessity of taking up the
fight against colonialism, seen as a global fight against capitalism. In 1924, Fimmen
writes: ‘From moment to moment, the entrepreneurs can choose the weakest point in
the international fighting front of the working class, and can concentrate their attack
on this.’ This triggers a struggle that still continues to this day, even if we no longer
talk about apartheid and colonialism, but about low-wage countries and globalisation.

The struggle for a better life for workers in the southern hemisphere is just one of
many action points of the ITF in the 1950s. Another action point focuses on the so-
called flags of convenience, the open ship registers used in countries such as Panama
and Liberia, that enable ship owners from rich countries to recruit their crews under
the conditions prevalent in poor countries. In 1958, more than thirty years before
the spectre of deflagging casts its shadow over Belgium, the ITF is already leading an
international campaign against this practice.

It shows the extent to which international trade union action has become important
for transport workers. More than any other sector, transport depends on networks
and international markets. This is considered inevitable in the nineteenth century and
it continues to be true in the twenty-first century. It is no surprise, then, that Omer
Becu is not the only BTB member to be active in the ITF: BTB president Roger Dekeyzer
too holds a seat on the ITF board, and really, there is not a single sector within the
BTB that is not actively participating in the ITF’s many working groups, sub-structures
and committees, as well as those of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Flashback to May 1896. John Wilson, member of the English Union of Seamen, hears
about a dockers’ strike in Rotterdam and organises a solidarity initiative. This prompts
him to found the International Federation of Ship, Dock and River Workers, a direct
forerunner of the ITF. In order to recruit members, in June a delegation is sent to
the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp. The English are enthusiastically welcomed in
Antwerp, assemblies are organised, meetings are held, and there is a demonstration
on the streets of Antwerp with a huge attendance. The police is less enthusiastic and
furiously pursues the English visitors. They manage to escape for several days,
one time even by swapping clothes with a few local dockers and crossing the police
cordon, arm in arm with the latter’s wives. The delegation is finally arrested and
deported from the country.

In August, another English delegation comes to Antwerp, including Ben Tillett,
leader of the London dockers. The police have their eyes open and quickly arrest Til-
lett. An accident occurs in prison. When a police officer provokes Tillett by blowing
cigar smoke in his face, his answer comes fast in the shape of a fist punch that not
only breaks the officer’s cigar, but also his nose. It comes as no surprise that, on his
return to London, Tillett complains of being mistreated by the police and requiring
medical care. The events prompt the British government to make an official complaint,
and trigger a debate in the Belgian parliament.

On a side note, it is also Tillett’s union that organised the Great London Dock Strike
seven years earlier in 1889, which was the London’s first major dock strike and had
many repercussions at international level. At the time, it led to the Dockers Union
being founded in London, and Antwerp quickly followed suit. Within a short time,
the Antwerp section boasted 1200 members in five sections and, in November, two
thousand men marched through the city centre in protest. However, this association
disappeared just as quickly.

But back to 1896. The Antwerp section of the International Federation of Ship, Dock
and River Workers is also in danger of slowly fading away, in the autumn of 1896, only
to be revitalised the following year. Under the name Kruiskensbond (Union of Small
Crossed), it organises the first major strike at the Port of Antwerp in 1899. And even
though it disappears after a lock-out the following year, this early Antwerp section
of the ITF is considered the direct forerunner of the dockworkers’ union.

Flash forward to June 2011. The telephone is ringing in the BTB’s office in Antwerp. A
bit odd, as it is a public holiday. On the other side of the line is Mac Urata, secretary
of the ITF, to say that Osanloo Mansour, president of the Iranian Union of Transport
Workers, has been freed after spending four years in prison. He adds that he does not
have any further information but wanted to tell the BTB anyway, because they have
always so strongly supported Osanloo: ‘Thanks for all what BTB has done.’ Then, a
click, connection gone, and a secretary of the Btb left speechless, all at sea with joy.
Louis Major’s Law on Port Labour

When we think of Ostend, we think of the seaside, fishermen and... Major. Have you heard of him? He looks like a walking bundle of nerves, but is always eager to help, with a kind face and a lot of black hair, which hasn’t seen a comb for a long time and is never concealed by a hat or cap. He is quick-witted and speaks frankly when expressing his ideas. He is always working or leaving one meeting to go to another, before leaving again in order to go and prepare a room, in which he will deliver a speech later the same evening. He eats if he finds the time and loves fruit."

These are the words of a contemporary who, like many others, is impressed by his young colleague at the Ostend Union of Seamen. It is in this capacity that Louis Major has begun his trade union career in the early 1920s. Major stands for a new generation of trade unionists, who come from working families but have scarcely ever worked on a shop floor themselves. Major has the opportunity to study at the Labour College, before assuming the role of secretary in the socialist movement. This technocratic generation, which emerges in the 1930s and leads the socialist movement until the 1970s, is far less focused on ideology and direct action. Major is a man of moderate and progressive reforms, by means of long talks around the negotiating table, focusing on complex and technical measures. It is not always easy to sell this to the followers, but Major makes up greatly for this with his charisma and qualities as a speaker, which he uses to guide his dockworkers with a firm hand (some say: like...
a tyrant) through the eventful post-war period. Louis Major is a trade union leader during a hectic period, the late 1940s and 1950s, a period of struggle for better wages and working conditions, and of relentless strikes in 1950 and 1960. The *btb* is fighting for a better life for its members, but is also engaged in an inner struggle against the communists. To quote a trade union leader of the period: ‘Back then, the union leaders commanded respect. The bosses and politicians were scared of us and respected us.’

But the name of the union leader with the dandy-like appearance and unruly hair will be remembered most of all because of the law that he puts to the vote in 1972, as Minister of Labour, that bears his name ever since: the Major Law. ‘No one can arrange for dock work to be conducted in port areas by any workers other than registered dockworkers’, the law states. This law definitively grants protected legal status to the dockworkers, which safeguards their flexible but vulnerable position as day workers, yet also guarantees that port work will be conducted safely and efficiently by qualified workers. It is certainly not a new system, only the legal enshrinement of a form of protection that, in practice, had already existed since the 1930s. Since then, the Major Law has become a powerful symbol. In order to fully grasp its importance, we have to look back to the Second World War and the introduction of social security.

The Port of Antwerp sees huge growth after the war. Massive new docks are constantly being constructed and the port begins to swallow up the polder villages to the north, all the way to the Dutch border. It crosses the river when another new port is built at Waasland. All of this is necessary in order to cope with the most important change in the transport sector of the century: the advent of the container, or the “containerisation” of the transport sector.

In 1946, the Province of Antwerp accounts for two thirds of all *btb* members, while East and West Flanders are home to just over one tenth each. The transport workers’ union is virtually absent in the rest of the country. The union focuses mainly on the port, inland shipping and merchant navy sectors. The fishing sector is small, and motor vehicle drivers are divided between an infinite number of small companies. Dockers have to be registered and to be able to present a valid pay book as evidence when being recruited. Sailors are required to register at a merchant navy pool. Boatmen and inland navigation workers do not yet have this kind of protection, but since the 1930s they dispose of a shipping exchange, and there are good legal regulations concerning chartering and crew management.

Early in 1945, sailors are given their own social security scheme, with compulsory subscriptions, unemployment and sickness allowances, a pension scheme, holiday pay and family allowance. Port labour is crucial for the allies by the end of the war, and the dockers are rewarded accordingly – especially because they are working while flying bombs literally are flying above their heads. In return, they are given a significant additional risk premium, which in Antwerp is called ‘shiver money’. Early 1947 the social security system is finally extended to include inland navigation. Boatmen are required to take out insurance, especially against illness, but this does not apply to owner-boatmen and pilots. The drivers are left out of the social security system. According to a study conducted at Waasland in 1956, there are 120 transport companies in the region, but a good part of the manpower is actually working illegally. In addition, there are 50 small companies completely operating illegally, while no less than 250 companies in the region never call on the services of a transport company, and manage their own transport. Wages are particularly low in the sector, while overtime and illegal labour are omnipresent. Taxi and bus drivers live mainly on their tips. So there is a long way to go and, like the rest of the socialist trade union movement, the *btb* chooses the slower path of the negotiating table. Strikes are rarely part of that, quite the contrary, in exchange for social agreements pinched from the employers, the union guarantees social peace throughout the term of each agreement. Most of the progress is achieved behind the scenes, invisible yet effective: little by little, the low wages earned in the sector begin to increase to a level of viability. In addition, the union is particularly concerned with working hours and safety, crucial aspects of working conditions in the transport sector.

Perhaps the most visible aspects of the new prosperity made possible by the long series of social agreements in the 1950s, and particularly in the golden sixties, are the building constructions of the union. In September 1949, the Dockworkers’ House is inaugurated, a large waiting room opposite to the recruitment office at the Port of Antwerp, providing a comfortable and sheltered place for as much as a thousand dockworkers to eat their lunch. As for the Sanatorium The Mick in Brasschaat, it has been reduced to ruin after the violent war years. Its reconstruction begins in 1950 at a cost of 55 million francs, which is considered a fortune at the time. Part of the money is raised by a Great Tombola. The prizes on offer give us an idea of what is important in the life of a worker during this period, just before the advent of the consumer society: 4 cars, 10 motorcycles, 5 sets of bedroom furniture, 5 sets of dining room furniture, 100 bicycles, radios, holidays, refrigerators, etc. The Mick reopens in 1953, followed by the Seamen’s House in 1955. Finally, in 1958, the *btb* proudly unveils the new Transport House on the Paardenmarkt. The union by then has reached a historic peak, with almost 33,000 members, but will not be able to maintain this for long. Ten years later, the transport union has decreased again to 23,000 members – less than in the 1920s. Only by the end of the 1980s membership figures begin to increase again, due mainly to the growth of the road transport sector.

Louis Major is not to witness this anymore, he passes away in 1985. Just a few years later, neo-liberal European directives begin to encroach upon his beloved dockworkers’ status. But the protection of dockworkers is a monument, rooted in a hundred years of social struggles, that still stands tall in 2013.
1973

Port strike in Ghent and Antwerp

The strike begins in Ghent. The Communist Party, strongly implanted with the Ghent dockers, calls a so-called 24-hour strike on 6 April, in order to ward off threats of dismissals. It is a success, the Port of Ghent is brought to a standstill. But, on the following morning, the strike is still going on in Ghent. Anumber of dockers assemble in a meeting. Most of them are communist party sympathisers, but there are also members of Arbeidersmacht (Workers’ Force), an independent group, which had organised solidarity actions at the Port of Antwerp the previous year, in support of the British dockers striking.

Demands are put on the table, some of which have been claimed for two years, and have already repeatedly been the cause of industrial actions. The increased cost of living is eating away at wages, with inflation out of control, increasing from three to seven per cent since 1970, and hitting especially hard during the first few months of 1973. The dockers are forced to work increasingly harder and longer for the same wage, but such a situation is not tenable, the basic income must be increased. Their health is being threatened by the furious pace of work. For example, the yield per team and per hour at the Port of Antwerp is one and a half times greater than that of the Port of Rotterdam. On top of that, foremen have a bad habit of working with incomplete teams, having three men doing the work of six. This has to do with an abusive mentality, but also with rapidly increasing mechanisation, making it possible to get more work done with fewer dockers. The consequences in terms of safety are easy to imagine. Thus, for example, the number of fatalities per year at the Port of Antwerp is twice that of Rotterdam, though Antwerp has fewer dockers. The union is not really doing something about it, on the contrary, since the 1950s productivity has been set as the main priority, as the trade-off used to justify wage demands and reduced working hours.

On 9 April, pamphlets are being distributed by the Communist Party and Arbeidersmacht at the Antwerp docker recruitment office, calling for a strike to show solidarity with their colleagues in Ghent. In the afternoon, the strike call takes effect and recruitment is prevented from taking place. But that does not affect the whole port, because in fact half of the Antwerp dockers are permanent employees and never pass by the recruitment office. The number of strikers remains unclear throughout the whole period of eight weeks of strike, but the figure is probably close to 2,000 dockers out of the 12,000 working at the Port of Antwerp.

The BTB’s response is quick and dismissive. On the same evening, the union refuses to recognise the strike. The next day, a few hundred strikers assemble on the Paardenmarkt square, demanding to recognise the strike, only to find the doors to the union offices barred and bolted.
Over the next few days, the strikers attempt to extend the strike, continuously wandering around the port, trying to persuade their work colleagues to down tools. More and more skirmishes follow. On 14 April, the socialist Mayor of Antwerp, Lode Craeybeckx, decides to bring in police troops and close the port to the strikers.

The recruitment office is not closed, but the strikers are no longer permitted to enter the actual docks. This port blockade causes major problems for the strikers. Their actions are now being relocated to the city in the form of demonstrations and meetings. In the meantime, the strike has been noticed by groups such as the Trotskyite RAL and the Maoist AMADA, always trying to gain control of the socialist union's large rank and file. They mingle with the strikers, constantly pushing them to more radical action. Also noticed is the flamboyant personality of Frans Wuytack, a non-partisan worker-priest, who had come to work as a docker after a few revolutionary adventures in South America. He is soon to become the face of the port strike, as a counterweight to the communist dominated but rather docile strikers' committee.

Faced with a labour shortage due to the partial strike, the bosses at the Port of Antwerp stage a counter-attack on 17 April. They close down the recruitment office and declare they are free to recruit dockers. This means that from now on, anyone can be recruited, including even non-registered dockers. These unregistered dockers are immediately labelled scabs and strike breakers. The strikers respond with sabotage and intimidation. The situation becomes increasingly grim. 'Many scabs have risked their skins for nothing throughout the strike, as the number of houses needing a builder or glazier and the number of cars needing a visit to the garage is inestimable', the strike committee proudly declares. Because the unions tolerate the free recruitment, the strikers turn against them too. On 24 April, there is a major demonstration in Antwerp (4,000 men according to the organisers, 1,200 according to the police), passing by the offices of several trade unions and socialist organisations. Despite the heavy police cordons around these buildings, windowpanes and shutters are smashed on all sides. Things get even more embarrassing when, on May Day, the police has to protect the honorary tribune occupied by the socialist leaders against the delegation of striking dockers, taking part in the procession.

After this difficult episode, as the BTB consistently continues to reject the strike, the Ghent and Antwerp sections of the socialist union try to resume the dialogue with the strikers. On neutral ground, in Saint-Nicolas, a compromise is hammered out with a few representatives from the Ghent strikers. It is a half-hearted attempt. The text starts by stating that the social agreements concluded are sufficient, and that the strike must immediately be brought to an end. In exchange, the union promises no sanctions will be imposed on the strikers. Moreover, in a spirit of compromise, the union offers a small amount of financial compensation and promises to listen to the dockworkers' needs. More importantly, and in the long run a major breakthrough in the union attitude towards its members, is the proposal that from now on social agreements will be put to a member referendum. But the compromise is not enough to convince the strikers. Quite the contrary: as no Antwerp delegation had been present in Saint-Nicolas, the strikers now accuse the union of trying to sow discord between the Ghent and Antwerp strikers.

The end is not yet in sight. On 10 May, some dockers' wives come to the Paardenmarkt square to knock on the union's doors and demand the strike pay for their husbands, after which they attack the police with their umbrellas, and a genuine fight breaks out. Demonstration after demonstration is held in the following weeks in the streets of Antwerp, sit-ins are being organised, water cannons are being used, undercover police officers are attacked in their cars and have to pull out their guns, as their car windows are shattered. Father Wuytack gets beaten up and hospitalised (but quickly manages to escape), a flow of money and food parcels is coming from all over the country, and the dockers' strike is the subject of parliamentary debate.

Credit where credit's due: it was the Ghent dockers that started the strike, it is also they who are ending it. On Friday 1 June, they decide by referendum to return to work. On the following Monday, the Antwerp dockers also organise a referendum. A small majority votes in favour of continuing the strike. But, as it has been agreed that a two-thirds majority is needed, they also decide to return to work. This goes not without trouble, partly because Arbeidersmacht calls for the industrial action to continue in the form of a 'slow-on' – doing the work super slowly and focused on safety. Later in the year, seventeen arrested strikers are given prison sentences, which again leads to bitter confrontations on the streets.

Forty years later, the whole episode of the 1973 dockers' strike remains a painful memory. Grimaces show up on faces of former union leaders when they are reminded of this period. The events are felt to have been particularly shocking. The socialist union leaders devote their lives to fighting for the workers, they win victory after victory, and now, instead of being respected and valued, they are attacked – and even by their own members! The relationship with the communists, never leg, has now, in the middle of the Cold War, become impossible. The socialist union is targeted with harsh criticism and dubbed: 'an apparatus at the service of the capitalist powers to keep the workers quiet', or even: 'the mainstay and best defender of capitalism'. But the trade union is defending the economic interests of its members, it is not in for political revolutions, and certainly not for communist dictatorships.

There is not only a political fault line between the union and the strikers, but also, to a considerable extent, a generation gap. The wartime generation is still very much in power, union leader Dolf Vervliet, aged 56, is actually one of the youngest. In 1973, we are in the middle of the hippie age, with its contestation of the establishment, with its own youth, looking for a place in a society that they do not recognise as their own. The strikers are not just communist preachers of ideology, some of them have 'hair down to their backsides', organising sit-ins and walking around with guitars and flowery hats. The older generation of trade unionists, putting their confidence in something like social planning agreements, is not fully in touch with this. There is a certain kind of estrangement, which is also reflected in crumbling membership figures, fluctuating between 23,000 and 25,000 throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Is it a coincidence that, when a new generation has finally taken over by the end of the 1980s, membership numbers start to rise again, only to double in less than twenty years?
In around 1985, the situation has become delicate for the Belgian merchant navy. Since the 1930s, the fleet has always counted approximately hundred ships, and between 3,000 and 3,500 sailors. But the crisis in the 1970s has made the Belgian ship owners considerably less competitive. An old spectre resurfaces in the form of deflagging, which means sailing boats under a foreign flag, in order to avoid costly taxes. As early as in the 1950s, the International Transport Workers' Federation had been organising industrial action against the cheap ship registers used in countries like Panama, Liberia and Costa Rica. All in all, the Belgian ship owners remain remarkably long loyal to the Belgian flag, mainly because of the 1948 law on inexpensive maritime loans, which the btb had long fought for.

But then, from 1977 onwards, the crisis delivers a heavy blow to the merchant navy, with one job in every three being lost, and the end is not in sight. National flags are disappearing around the globe, sailors are losing the efficient but costly social protection afforded by their own countries and are increasingly being replaced by crews from less developed countries. The Belgian government seeks a compromise, and finds it by establishing a second ship register in a friendly neighbour country, Luxembourg. In 1991, virtually the entire Belgian fleet is relocated to the Luxembourg flag.

The btb has no other option but to accept this decision, albeit with a heavy heart. The union has fought fifty years for decent social protection for sailors. Right after the Second World War, even before the dockers, the Union
of Seamen obtains its own sailor pool, as well as a subsistence protection system, which means that a sailor who is not out at sea earning money receives a waiting allowance. After that sailors get their own joint committee, special social security scheme, pay increases, accident insurance, compensatory leave, a Seamen’s House (onshore lodging for sailors, opened in 1954, closed down in 2012), and a Maritime House (central administrative office, 1970). But the union now has to choose between social protection and employment. That is not a real choice, of course, and the Btb accepts the Luxembourg arrangement, as it seems to guarantee a minimum amount of work. But things do not work out so well. In fact, the number of sailors in the pool falls from 3,500 in 1985 to 2,000 in 1995. During the same period, the merchant navy’s deadweight tonnage falls from 2.3 to 1.5 million tonnes. More and more Belgian sailors are replaced by cheap foreign workers, and enrolments at the Antwerp Maritime Academy plummet to an all-time low.

A turning point occurs, remarkably, when the European Union decides to intervene. For the EU, member states supporting their own economy with public money is a sheer taboo, but on the other hand European leaders do not like what is happening: member states are competing with each other so hard that fleets all over the continent are quickly disappearing, and it is the big ship owners on other continents who are gaining the most. However hard to accept, in 1997 the EU decides to approve regulations that enable the member states to provide public economic support in specific and exceptional situations, through tax exemptions. Strange though it may seem, the Belgian public authorities initially do not apply these new regulations, it seems like all faith in a national fleet has faded. But then eventually, in 2002, a new taxation is introduced, as it seems like the Btb has not been able to secure any further essential improvements in this sector after 1978.

What happens to the sailors is in part comparable to the situation of the boatmen workers. Although they by far exceed the numbers of the sailors, and take care of half of all freight transportation at the ports, the boatmen are still being treated step-motherly. Highly fragmented and poor, this sector hardly has the resources to invest in the technology required by the modern economy. In around 1930, there are 10,000 inland navigation vessels and 25,000 crew members, most of whom are independent boatmen living on their own boats with their families, and, in the absence of deckhands, only have their wives to help them. They do not have their own union. Some boatmen also work for ship owners and are known as foreman-boatmen. It is from their ranks and crew members that the Btb slowly but surely recruits its first members in the 1920s. In the 1930s, the union takes some crucial steps, which include introducing a boatmen’s exchange (which removes the need to frequent bars in order to pick up freight), legal contracts of employment and legal minimum crews. After the Second World War, inside the Btb a fully-fledged inland waterway section is functioning, and like the sailors, the boatmen obtain their own social security scheme, joint committee, subsistence allowance, regulations on working hours, pay increases, and their own house featuring a supermarket, known as the Schipperswelzijn (Skippers’ Well-Being) at the Port of Antwerp. Like the merchant navy, inland transport experiences its highs and lows after the war, until the crisis in the 1970s. In 1979, the sector still has about three thousand boats. By 2000, that number has fallen to just over one thousand.

Yet, here too it looks like the tide is turning, just less visible than with the merchant navy, as there is no key moment, no specific action or decision. The inland waterways appear to have gained a new reputation. Once considered obsolete, outmoded and uneconomical, they now have come to represent a progressive, efficient and green sector. The inland waterways once again have the wind in their sails – so to speak – and see growth comparable to the transport sector as a whole, in sharp contrast to a stagnating rail transport sector. In 2010, the inland waterways transport 150% more freight than in 1970, and have become twice as big as the rail transport sector. The inland waterways once again have the wind in their sails – so to speak – and see growth comparable to the transport sector as a whole, in sharp contrast to a stagnating rail transport sector. In 2010, the inland waterways transport 150% more freight than in 1970, and have become twice as big as the rail transport sector. The number of boats has been increasing to 1,600. So there is a light at the end of the tunnel, after all, and inland navigation may finally achieve social progress.
She had imagined things to turn out differently, European commissioner Loyola de Palacio, that Thursday 20 February 2013, when she was preparing to attend a conference in Hangar 26, behind the Bonaparte basin in Antwerp. After a telephone call from the police, she had decided to just let it go. The unions, after hearing that she would show up, had been turning up en masse at the conference venue. The BTB delegation in particular was being noticed, brutally breaking through the police cordon and taking up what it considered the most appropriate position. But it was all in vain, the lady would not show up.

Published in December 1997, the Green Paper on Sea Ports and Maritime Infrastructure is far from being good news for the European dockworkers’ unions. In this Green Paper, the European Commission states that it is determined to extend the liberalisation of European markets to port labour. So, no more dockworkers pools, protected by law and limited by a licensing system, as stipulated in the 1972 Major Law in Belgium, that port clients are obliged to work with. Quite the contrary, in the eyes of Europe the docker pool is just like any other another service delivery firm, competition with other similar firms will bring prices down and ultimately promote prosperity in Europe. The unions fully disagree with this view. For them, it is essential that dockers have special status, in order to guarantee living standards for eight thousand dockworkers and their families. They point out that their training, specialist knowledge and wealth of experience represent the best way to guarantee quality of work and productivity at the ports.
When, in 1999, Loyola de Palacio, from the Spanish conservative party, is put in charge of the ports, the unions know that they should expect the worst. In February 2001, she presents a draft ports directive, authorising self-handling, which means the carriers themselves loading and unloading ships without using registered dockworkers. Baffled, the BTB decides to engage in a titanic struggle, and attempt, for the first time in the history of the European Union, to stop the neoliberal policy adopted by the European Commission.

In September 2001, the BTB informs its members in several meetings and, less than one month later, about five hundred militants demonstrate against the Ports Directive in Ghent. The slogan adopted for the demonstration leaves no room for doubt: ‘Europe Too – Hands off the dockworkers – the Major Law’. The dockers’ union now starts to actively look out for allies. First MEP Kathleen Van Brempt is contacted, and in December a European demonstration brings two thousand to the streets of Brussels, including the three Belgian dockers’ unions.

The following year, in 2002, the Belgian dockworkers’ unions form a united front, and call in the European Federation of Transport Workers. The unions decide to deliver a first heavy blow. On 7 June, they block the five main access routes to the Port of Antwerp. After this, the BTB continues to look for other allies, which it finds in the dockers of Marseille. In November, the BTB convenes a conference in Antwerp for all the North Sea dockworkers’ unions, to coordinate international action. Their position is clear: no port directive, and if there has to be one, no self-handling.

In 2003, the port directive appears on the agenda of the European Parliament, and the unions are not going to let it pass silently. On 17 January, the Belgian ports once again are shut down by a 24-hour general strike – and as in the meantime the authorities have made it illegal to organise road blocks, scuffles take place with the police. During the parliamentary debates in March, thousands of dockers from the four corners of Europe demonstrate in front of the parliament buildings, both in Brussels and Strasbourg. Finally, the European Parliament decides to take up neither the union demands or the European Commission proposals, and orders further examination of the directive, to be discussed again in November. At another European meeting organised in Antwerp, the unions decide to continue the battle. Demonstrations are held in Rotterdam (8000 participants) and in Barcelona in September (5000 participants).

On Thursday 20 November 2003, what many believed would be impossible happens: for the first time in the history of the European Union, a liberalisation proposal of the carriers themselves loading and unloading ships without using registered dockworkers.

The directive, however only after adding a supplement: a system of labour registration, as required by the Parliament. But no one is applauding, too little too late: by now the Ports Directive has caused too much unrest and is widely distrusted. The unions stick with their viewpoint that no directive at all is preferable to a modified directive, and in any case the new proposal is still based on neoliberal ideas. And remarkably, at the other end of the social and economic spectrum no cheering is heard either: the authorities of the privatised British ports too are rejecting the proposal. Of course being British they are likely to object to anything that comes from Europe, but apart from that they argue that the proposed regulations are way too uniform for a sector that it is fundamentally diversified. And last but not least, the European Parliament too has little enthusiasm left for what essentially is not much more than an ill-conceived directive.

Even if the second version of the Ports Directive gets little support, the dockworkers’ unions think it is wise to show their teeth again. On 16 January 2006, two days before the debate in the European Parliament, a demonstration of European dockers takes place in the streets of Strasbourg, with a record attendance of 9,000 demonstrators. Things get rough, these dockworkers are not going to stand back and let things happen, there are heavy riots, fights with the police, arrests, sentences and imprisonments.

On 18 January 2006, for the second time, the European Parliament rejects the Ports Directive proposal – even with a compulsory registration added – with a crushing majority of 520 to 120 votes. In March, the European Commission decides to step out, and officially and definitively withdraws the proposed Ports Directive. The war is won, and it is a historic victory: little David of the docks has beaten the European Goliath.

But no victory is forever, of course. Just a few years later, the European Commission sets up a series of working committees to take a close look at the ports issue in all its wide range of diversity. No longer, at first, it is about introducing a directive, rather a thing of ‘soft law’ – in close communication with all the partners involved, of course ... At the same time, it is made clear that, in a Europe based on the free traffic of goods and services, Belgium and its dockers pool are seen as the worst pupil in the class. So, better keep those eyes open.

Euro-demonstration in Antwerp on December 13th 2001. Photo: Bob Baete (BTB, Antwerp)
Social dumping in the European road transport sector

Ever more Belgian professional drivers are losing their job because letterbox companies in countries like Slovakia or Bulgaria are skimming the market of the international transport. The East European drivers are barely making a living, camping out for weeks on squalid parking lots along the motorways. They are shipped in from their home countries in a van, and return home in the same little van that ships in their replacements. Their trucks too are foreign, but they seldom leave Belgium. Only the papers go to and fro, returning so to say approved.

On Wednesday 14 April 2010, a BTB team arrives in Bratislava. For three years, the BTB has been doing investigation of foreign drivers on Belgian motorway parking areas, leading to the conclusion that the capital of Slovakia is popular with Belgian transport companies setting up bogus companies. Thus it is being decided to go and make some explorations on the spot. The BTB team takes a long walk through the streets of Bratislava. The first address they arrive at appears to be the seat of no less than sixty companies, including six Belgian transport companies. The team takes photos, but gets on the nerves of a porter, who cautions them to leave. At the next address, equally dubious, the union delegation again has to leave the premises in a hurry, still only after noticing the presence of another Belgian company. Address after address the trip continues, one firm after the other, and all are fake. ‘Remarkably enough we did not see any trucks at any of the places that we visited’, a member of the BTB team tells us, ‘And actually that would be impossible, as none of the companies visited has parking spaces for trucks,'
storage areas or garages. In many places, only a plaque or letterbox indicates the presence of a company.

In 2010, social dumping, which generally involves East European drivers, is the worst plague affecting the road transport sector. Looking into the cause of this takes us a while back in time. It all starts in around 1990. That year, the main concerns of the union are: rest periods, tachographs, delays at border posts, road safety and blood alcohol checks. Low wage competition from European member states is not yet a major concern.

However, on the European side, there is some writing on the wall. Most European countries protect their domestic road transport and only allow cabotage (transport provided inside countries by foreign companies) on a piecemeal basis. At the end of 1990, it is announced that the Benelux countries will allow cabotage between the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Apparently this is seen as a first step to the introduction of a single European market in 1993. Immediately, the BTB is in a state of alarm, and puts a demand on the table to level out at the highest wages. In view of the recent admissions of Spain and Portugal to the EU in 1986, the union voices its concern over the flow to be expected of low wage drivers from the South.

But actually, in the early 1990s, there is more of a shortage of truck drivers. The employers are constantly asking to be allowed to use foreign drivers. The BTB is suspicious and responds negatively, stating that it would be better to increase wages, improve working conditions and provide more effective training, in order to make the profession more attractive for young people. Since the 1990-1991 school year, for the first time it is possible to follow a course in truck driving in technical schools. On 26 June 1992, the first 46 professional driver qualifications are presented at a formal ceremony in the Brussels City Hall.

But what do 46 certificates mean, compared to a fleet of 50,000 trucks? A routine police check at the Port of Ghent early 1993 reveals some staggering facts. Within a few hours, 77 truck drivers are caught breaking a wide range of rules: tachograph manipulation, driving without a permit, or without insurance, while two drivers do not even have a driving licence. Another growing problem during this period is that trucks are systematically overloaded.

None of this is good for safety, of course. During the 1990s, a few major road accidents with terrible consequences, many of which involve trucks, make the headlines. This tragic series of events culminates in the terrible disaster in the Mont Blanc tunnel on 24 March 1999, when a Belgian truck causes a fire that leads to 41 people losing their lives. There is pressure from the public to take measures against this plague of rogue drivers. At the end of the 1990s, the government proposes a series of measures: confiscation of driving licences, higher fines for violation of driving hours and rest periods, a driving licence demerit point system, speed cameras, etc. Not all of these measures are implemented, but it is clear that what is being aimed at is the behaviour of the driver. The BTB is forced to defend itself and its members, and from 1997 onwards launches a number of safety campaigns, such as its Tiredness Kills initiative.

But the real threat comes from abroad. There is rumble on the international level: 1992 is marked by large-scale industrial action against planned European reforms. In France, the truck drivers go on strike and their road blocks paralyse the country for several months. Slowly it is becoming clear that a problem is coming up with drivers from East Europe. The terrible accident that leads to the death of eleven people in the Saint-Gothard tunnel in 2001 is caused by a Belgian truck, driven by an illegal driver from East Europe. A few months before, a group of 24 Lithuanian drivers are found, in Alost, treated like slaves and then discarded like paper tissues by their employer.

However, social dumping from East Europe has not yet started. In 2002, employers continue to complain that they cannot find enough drivers, while the union continues to demand wage increases and more effective training courses. The tsunami from the East has not yet been unleashed. An international action day against driver fatigue represents the most important initiative during this period. In the meantime, employment sees a spectacular rise from 44,000 drivers in 1996 to 56,000 in 2000. The traffic police intensifies its checks on trucks, as part of a relentless fight against driving time violations, overloaded trucks and failure to respect distances between vehicles. The BTB adopts an unequivocal position: ‘The Belgian Transport Workers’
Union is in favour of reinforced checks, which make it possible to improve safety in the sector and combat unfair competition, and generally benefit the professional drivers.’

In 2004, eight East European countries join the European Union, including Poland and Slovakia. One year later, it becomes clear that there is a problem: more and more East European trucks and drivers show up on the Belgian roads, thus taking advantage – both legally and illegally – of the major social and tax-related differences with other European countries. ‘We cannot fail to notice that the trend towards the deflagging of international road transport in Belgium is greater than we supposed’, states the BTB the end of 2005, in response to two memorable documentaries shown on Flemish television that focus on the lives of East European drivers in Belgium.

The problem keeps getting bigger over the next years. This is purely and simply a case of social dumping. The BTB has nothing against foreign drivers, but strongly opposes their exploitation by rogue employers who are making the East European drivers work like slaves for poverty wages, thus driving out of the market any drivers who are working under Belgian conditions.

In 2009, the BTB fights back by sending an open letter to the minister and organising a round table discussion. On 19 May 2009, the union organises its first grand march on Brussels, in protest against the social dumping on the road transport market. The union action is extended to the European level and, on 29 April 2009, the European Parliament adopts a historic regulation on cabotage, which in theory prevents the malpractices of setting up letterbox companies. But the rogue employers are craftier than expected, and further action is necessary. The above-mentioned visit to Bratislava results in the publication of a Black Book and, at the end of 2011, the BTB organises, with its French and Dutch counterparts, industrial action on the Belgian motorways. One thing is clear: it ain’t over yet.

Social dumping of low wage drivers is not the only problem the road transport sector is facing. Another type of social dumping exists in replacing wage-earning drivers with bogus self-employed drivers. In 2009 and 2010, the BTB organises with the European Federation of Transport Workers several protest truck convoys in Brussels. In addition, the BTB is still committed to enhance truck driver safety by insisting on a good night’s sleep for drivers to prevent them from dozing off behind the wheel, by proposing measures to reduce the risk for drivers to come into contact with toxic gases when transporting hazardous materials, and by taking action for safe and secure parking facilities along highways.

In the road transport and logistics sector, truck drivers are certainly not the only workers facing major structural problems. Airport staff responsible for ground handling (transport of baggage) are increasingly under pressure, which leads to a strike at the airport of Zaventem in August 2008. Three years later, in August 2011, in response of talks about introducing a third handler in Zaventem – which the workers think will lead to increased competition, to their detriment – the workers go back on strike. And there seems to be no end to it. Increasingly intense competition results in increasingly flexible working hours. There is talk of working two shifts a day. Ground handling companies speed up loading luggage, while reducing the number of personnel; two-thirds of the employees are suffering from back and joint injuries. Another major strike paralyzed Brussels Airport in May 2013. Not surprisingly much media attention is devoted to such actions, which seriously disrupt air traffic for several days.

In other sub-sectors, the situation is fortunately less tense. More specifically for bus drivers and removal men attempts are made to introduce stricter regulation by introducing identification badges and proficiency certificates. On the side of the fast-growing subsector of logistics in 2005 at last a function classification is being introduced for what is euphemistically labelled ‘the non-driving staff’. Two years later all logistics companies are united in the joint committee PCI40 of the transport sector. In 2012 there are approximately 62,000 people working in the road transport and logistics sector in Belgium, almost two thirds of whom are union members. The BTB has over 20,000 members in this sector. The biggest boom takes place in the 1990s.
Growing numbers of companies and shops seek to reduce the amount of (expensive) warehouse space by having their products delivered just before stock levels run low (just-in-time principle). It means, of course, that distribution businesses have to speed up deliveries and fine-tune delivery processes, which results in strong growth in the logistics industry. Within the BTB, road transport and logistics is the largest section in 2010, a landmark change for a professional organisation that has always been centred around the large mass of dockers, since it was first set up. Another historic development: with economic resources of the transport sector moving from Flanders to a fast-growing Wallonia, the balance at present being 50/50, influence is increasing of the Brussels and Wallonian sections in this national union, which has been traditionally based in Flanders.