

2 The Belgian Socialist Party

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HISTORY

The Creation of the Belgian Workers' Party

The Belgian Workers' Party (*Parti ouvrier belge* – POB), created on 5–6 April 1885, emerged from the combination of several currents, the main ones of which were a minority socialist movement in a rural and catholic Flanders and the Walloon workers' movement. The first current was essentially established in the city of Ghent and was mainly influenced by the German social democrats. The second was characterized by traditions of conflicts marked by a-political if not anti-political anarchism (Liebman, 1979).

From the beginning, the POB organized itself on the basis of a network of economic or professional institutions. Beyond certain verbal declarations, all activity of the party and the mobilization of its members aimed for two objectives: the supervision and incorporation of Walloon workers and the conquest of universal suffrage as the central means of intervention in Belgium. From the end of the nineteenth century, the forms and nature of mobilizations demonstrate a rejection of any revolutionary strategy – often negatively connoted (Delwit, De Waele and Marquès-Pereira, 1989) – and the reformist ambition of this young party. Through the articulation of these two objectives, the POB distinguished itself from the entire international socialist movement by organizing – often under pressure – three general strikes: in 1893, in 1902 and in 1913.

An absence of interest in theoretical or ideological questions was confirmed by the fact that it was only after obtaining the right of suffrage tempered by the plural vote (1893) that the POB sought to attribute to itself – nine years after its creation – a declaration of principles that remains the same today.

At the party conference held at Quaregnon in March 1894, a charter was adopted, referred to as the *Charte de Quaregnon*. Although it was poor in terms of ideological sophistication, it was much more elaborate than the first constituent texts of POB. This was a rare attempt to give a perspective to the daily fight. It remains today a valuable document due to its longevity and also because of the symbolism it represents for numerous socialist militants.

Rapidly, the POB's focus on Parliament – as the working class representative – changed from merely a means into its main objective. Through parliamentary action, the POB would act in favour of the oppressed in Belgian society. But questions as essential as perspectives on the conquest

of state power or a reappraisal of the power exercised by the upper middle class were not addressed, or else very rarely tackled. The POB would exercise power as soon as the opportunity occurred. In the meantime, once the voting system became proportional (1899) and thus parliamentary action had become a defining part of party life, only the exercise of power by the POB had yet to be attained.

Despite the fact that universal suffrage had not yet been achieved at the eve of the First World War, the integration of POB in Belgian political life was already well advanced. The vote on war credits at the beginning of August 1914 and participation in the government 'sacred union' definitively marked its realization.

The Inter-War Period

The lack of theoretical perspective in the POB was a well known fact within the international workers movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Eminent socialists, such as Karl Kautsky, taunted the POB with this fact. Asked about the position of Belgians on the debate over revisionism, he answered that he did not see what the party should have to review (Mabille and Lorwin, 1979). This dimension was never denied, whether between the two wars, or since 1945.

The only notable exception to the lack of theoretical sophistication resides in the works of Henri De Man during the 1920s and 1930s. Representative of the Marxist wing before 1914, De Man had been deeply affected by the start of the war. Based upon experiences in Germany and the United States, he developed a body of work marking him as an innovative thinker in the Belgian context.

In the 1920s, during an economic growth period, new theoretical revisions of socialism began to take shape. Among them, De Man's *Beyond Marxism* played a major role. Published in 1926 in Germany, he stated that his contribution was meant to be a revision, if not an actual supplanting, of Marxism, based on an individualistic point of view. He rejected the idea of a proletarian struggle founded on economic and political oppression by the upper middle class in the framework of the capitalist production system. De Man contradicted the perspective of a separation of classes according to economic criteria and to the situation in production relations. In this way, he discarded the proletarian-type community and, to show the invalidity of Marxist analysis, gave instead as an example the United States. For De Man, it is less the objective situation than the one felt by the workers themselves that is the heart of the problem. Based on this observation, he introduced a sophisticated analysis of the social psychology on which workers' reactions are no longer conceived on the basis of class relations and exchange methods, but on the basis of an 'auto estimation instinct', that

would lead to a 'social inferiority complex'. As important as *Beyond Marxism* was, it should be noted, this work made more of an impact outside Belgium.

Another development at the beginning of the 1930s, after the onset of the economic crisis, involved the pressing demands of the trade union commission of the POB, which was worried if not panicked about the absence of a social or economic perspective. In response, De Man wrote the *Working Plan*, adopted by the POB at the Christmas conference of 1933. The call for state intervention for reflation was simultaneously made in the United States. The *Working Plan* had a double significance: the introduction of a new role for the state and as a formidable means of mobilization around concrete objectives in order to counter the growing influence of the Belgian Communist Party (*Parti communiste de Belgique* – PCB).

1945: A New Party

After the Second World War, five important turning-points occurred during which the party re-positioned itself politically and ideologically. This re-positioning was more an adjustment than a new theoretical approach. The first event took place in May 1945, during the 'victory conference'. Two major modifications occurred: in the form of affiliation and name. The Belgian Workers Party became the Belgian Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste belge* – PSB; *Belgische Socialistische Partij* – BSP in Flemish). On the political front, the reformist perspective was made explicit: the transition from the capitalist economy to a socialist economy could be achieved only through a gradual process.

The second event took place between 1958 and 1959. Following a Liberal-Socialist government experience (1954–8) and the electoral failure of 1958, the leadership of PSB–BSP faced critics from its left wing. Subsequently, the party adopted a programme of structural reforms already approved by the union federation, the FGTB (*Fédération générale du travail de Belgique*) during its conferences of 1954 and 1956. These structural reform programmes had, according to its organizers, a planning vocation aimed at the development of an economic democracy.

Thirdly, in November 1974, the party held an explicitly ideological conference. Its continued role in opposition and the redefinition of its identity constituted the main motivations for the organization of these hearings. Generally speaking, the content of the resolutions and comments made at the conference represented an undoubted shift to the left. It is especially important to note that the enlargement of economic democracy appeared to be the *sine qua non* of this new identity.

In 1978, the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB–BSP) broke into two separate formations due to the process of federalization in Belgium: the *Parti socialiste* (PS) in the French Community and the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) in the Flemish

one. Since then, French-speaking and Flemish-speaking socialists in Belgium have made autonomous choices and have had only minimal consultation.

The fourth event concerns the PS. It followed the electoral failure of 1981 – the PS was sent into opposition – the arrival in power of a new party president – Guy Spitaels – and the necessity to review the programme adopted eight years earlier at the peak of the period of economic growth. The Socialist Party gathered for an ideological conference on 27 and 28 March 1982, on the theme 'renovate and act'. If the conference of 1974 had been symbolic of the 'Golden 1960s', the one in 1982 entailed a re-focus on the economic crisis. Planning was left aside, and selective reflation was now in vogue, an idea and watchword defended by the PS from 1982 to 1985. At the same time, the *Socialistische Partij* opened itself to the christian workers' movement under the leadership of its president Karel Van Miert, later a commissioner of the European Union. This opening was in particular represented by the presence of Jef Ulburghs, a priest of Limburg, on the Flemish socialist list at the European elections of 1984.

Finally, Guy Spitaels initiated in 1990 a Forum-convention on social democratic identity. The functions of parties, the role of socialism and the nature of the socialist project had to be at the centre of concerns and of new reflection. The discussion addressed new problems, such as the demand for an ecological society, the necessity to confront new social movements and the need to reform certain forms of economy that had always characterized the Belgian workers movement. However, Spitaels especially contradicted the idea that ideology no longer mattered, and that the socialist movement had exhausted its functions. Three ways were explored to restore some vigour to Belgian social democracy: a reform of the 'ethics of solidarity', especially through taxation; an advance of democracy in Belgium through the federalization of the country; and a new policy of disarmament and co-operation. However, due to pressures as the result of conflict over the financing of education, these reforms were never implemented.

ORGANIZATION AND PARTY PROFILE

The Socialist Pillar

The Belgian Socialist Party has integrated and encapsulated the major part of the working class politically, socially and culturally, not only through partisan organization but also through multiple associated organizations, of which the most important are the mutual social insurance system and the trade union. This is how it became one of the 'pillars' of Belgian society, confronting the other 'pillar' – the Catholic world – through one party, one trade union, one mutual insurance system and many other organizations.

Until 1945, the socialist trade union – the union commission and then the *Confédération générale du travail de Belgique*, CGTB – was organically related to the party. At the Liberation, this link was officially undone. However, the FGFB, which succeeded the CGTB, remained profoundly linked to the Socialist Party especially after the creation of 'common action' in 1949. The workforce of the FGFB grew continuously after 1945 in line with a general increase in the rate of unionization until 1980. Even though a slight decrease has occurred, this rate remains today very substantial in comparison to the European average.

Until 1945, membership of the POB was constituted through union organizations. This situation changed during the 'victory conference' in May 1945. Collective membership was abandoned at the benefit of individual membership. The Belgian Socialist Party became therefore a 'direct party'.

Party Membership

The principle of individual membership has not undermined the mass character of the POB. This is shown by the evolution of the number of members in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Number of members of the PS and the SP, 1978-95

Year	PS	SP
1978	147,269	111,944
1979	144,852	112,883
1980	154,798	113,922
1981	167,087	116,730
1982	158,649	114,181
1983	149,829	111,798
1984	150,671	108,500
1985	140,462	108,223
1986	138,820	105,777
1987	145,919	103,778
1988	139,768	101,863
1989	131,897	99,112
1990	129,388	99,235
1991	126,795	97,919
1992	125,281	93,351
1993	125,073	89,085
1994	124,081	
1995	117,553	

Source: Author's own compilation.

Party Structure

According to its statutes, the goal of the PS is to 'organize in the midst of the class struggle, all the socialist forces of Brussels and Wallonia, without any distinction as to race, sex, language, nationality, religious or philosophical beliefs, in order to conquer power and consequently to realize the complete emancipation of the workers'. One can join the PS individually, with the required minimum age set at 16. Adhesion takes place at a local or company section.

The basic structure of the PS is the local section from which territorial limits and conditions of subsistence are determined by the federation of wards. The sections are approved by the communal entity in a USC (*Union socialiste communale*) which has competencies on political matters and on communal management. Even though adhesion to the PS is established at the place of residency, some company sections are created by the initiative or with the agreement of a wards' federation. The level superior to the local and company sections, as well as the USC, is the Federation, which covers the electoral district. The PS currently has fourteen such Federations.

At least once a year, the Walloon Federation on one side and the Brussels Federation on the other hold a regional congress having 'power of decision in the frame of the competencies that are attributed to the regions'.

The general instances of the PS revolve around the congress, the bureau, the forum and the college of federal secretaries. The congress is the supreme organ of the Party. It defines its political path – except for exclusive regional matters which are dependent on the regional congresses. It assembles every second year and on this occasion elects the members of the bureau. In between congresses, the bureau decrees the political decisions of the Party and makes all decisions regarding Federal competencies. Its missions and importance have therefore increased.

Since 10 May 1997, the bureau includes the president, the general secretary, six representatives of the Federation of Brussels as well as one 'by a slice of 5,000 affiliated starting from the 5,001st affiliated' and two representatives from every other Federation plus one 'by a slice of 5,000 affiliated starting from the 5001st affiliated'. The forum has a supple structure without any internal power. It constitutes a space for reflection and debate and is open to everyone. At least once a year, the Party must organize a forum on a theme chosen by the bureau. The college of Federal secretaries is a new body. It is competent on 'matters of organization and administration'. It is constituted by the fourteen Federal secretaries, the secretary of the inter-federal committee of the company sections and the general secretary who presides the session. The president and the two vice-presidents may assist the session.

There are now four national positions for the Socialist Party: The president, the two vice-presidents and the general secretary. On 10 May 1997, the statutory congress adopted a major change concerning the presidency. In the future, the president will be elected by a direct poll of the affiliated for a mandate of four years, renewable once consecutively.

The Socialist Party has two vice-presidents, one from Brussels and one from Wallonia. Henceforth, the Walloon vice-president will be elected among and by the Walloon members of the bureau and the Brussels vice-president among and by the Brussels members of the bureau.

The general secretary is elected by the congress. He has responsibility in 'matters of organization and recruitment decreed by the instances of the PS'. For all the factions of the Party the PS has temporarily installed proportional quotas:

- No faction may count more than 80 per cent of representatives of the same sex.
- Every faction has to record at least 15 per cent of representatives under 30 years old.

The pyramidal structure of the Flemish Socialist Party is fairly similar. There are also proportional quotas for youth and for women. However, during the congress held on 9 and 10 December 1995, the Flemish Socialists introduced two statutory and very important innovations. Henceforth, the president of the Party will be elected by universal poll by the members. Moreover, the delegates at the congress of the Party will no longer be federation delegates but section delegates. The intermediate structure of the Party is therefore short-circuited.

Electoral Performance

Since its beginning, the Belgian Socialist Party has oriented all its action and energy toward the conquest of universal suffrage and the exercise of power. From this, three important moments can be highlighted: the obtaining of male suffrage regulated by the plural vote in 1893; the first governmental participation during the 1914–18 war; and the promulgation in 1919 of male universal suffrage (women have had the vote since 1948). With these advances, the Belgian Socialist Party became one of the main actors in the Belgian political framework.

From 1945 onwards, the Socialist Party experienced a spectacular electoral evolution, though with time a significant erosion has set in. In recent times, the PS and SP attained their best performance at the 1987 ballot, after six years of opposition to the Liberal–Social Christian government coalition. On the other hand, at the legislative elections of 1995, PS and SP fell to their lowest level since 1945. The 'socialist family' received only 24.42 per cent of the vote.

Since 1945, the Belgian Socialist Party, and then the PS and SP, were often present in the government; most often with the Social Christians from the PSC–CVP, an exception being the three-party Socialist–Liberal–Social Christian coalition and, between 1954 and 1958, one with only the Liberals. The PS and SP were absent from political power between 1981 and 1987. But since 1988, they have exercised power at federal and federated levels (Walloon, Brussels and Flemish regions, and the French community; see Table 2.2).

Just after the Second World War, the clerical–anti-clerical cleavage seemingly reasserted itself in two separate instances. The first concerned the return of King Leopold III. At the consultative referendum organized on 12 March 1950, the results maintained the picture of a Belgium divided between a Catholic Flanders and a liberal-socialist Wallonia. Admittedly 57.68 per cent of the voters declared themselves in favour of the return of the king. But in the Brussels region and even more in the Walloon area, the majority was 'no'. The second refers to the 'school war' that took place between 1954 and 1958. After difficult negotiations, a 'schools pact' was signed between the main formations of the country. The signature of this pact marks a very important moment in the political history of Belgium. The secular–Catholic cleavage lost, in a short period of time, the strong significance it had possessed from 1945 to 1958. In its place, class and linguistic cleavages emerged as the defining axes of conflict (especially during the 1960–1 conflicts).

The Belgian Socialist Party, however, did not acknowledge this turning-point, nor the structural modifications in the Walloon and Flemish economy. It paid a high price for this misunderstanding at the elections of 1965 when it experienced an unprecedented fall in support to the Democratic Front for French-speakers (*Front démocratique des Francophones* – FDF) in Brussels, to the People's Union (*Volksunie*) in Flanders and to those Walloon parties who anticipated the creation of the Walloon Rally (*Rassemblement wallon* – RW). The very mediocre results the Belgian Socialist Party received in 1968 encouraged its president Léo Collard to break with tradition and make an appeal, on 1 May 1969, to a 'progressive gathering', that would transcend philosophical cleavages. This invitation was not followed up for two main reasons. There was no real willingness to answer the call from President Collard, and little or no effort was undertaken to seriously draft concrete proposals in this direction. The Socialist Party never attempted to extricate itself from its position as the homogeneous party in the Walloon part of the country. To the party, any realignment had to be achieved through an integration of other progressives, especially Christians, into its ranks.

In the 1980s, an initiative aimed at a 'breakthrough' similar to the Dutch experience, was made by the SP towards Christian progressives. Despite the election of Jef Ulburghs as a member of the European Parliament, this

Table 2.2 Electoral performance of the Belgian Socialists, 1945-95

	Percentage of votes			Percentage of seats		
	Brussels-Hal-Vil- vorde	Wallonia Flanders	Kingdom	Bruxelles-Hal-Vil- vorde	Wallonia Flanders	Kingdom
1946						
PSB-BSP	33.33	36.34	31.56	33.33	39.47	32.67
Liberal-Socialist Cartel		2.05	1.59		2.63	1.98
1949						
PSB-BSP	28.00	37.82	29.74	28.12	39.47	31.13
1950						
PSB-BSP	38.37	44.56	34.51	37.50	45.45	34.43
Liberal-Socialist Cartel		2.44	1.76		2.59	1.88
1954						
PSB-BSP	42.25	47.66	37.34	43.75	50.00	38.67
Liberal-Socialist Cartel		2.81	2.09		3.94	2.35
1958						
PSB-BSP	40.01	46.17	35.78	40.62	50.00	37.73
Liberal-Socialist Cartel		2.61	2.09		2.63	2.35
1961						
PSB-BSP	39.21	46.42	36.72	40.62	51.31	39.62
1965						
PSB-BSP	25.74	35.20	28.28	27.27	38.88	30.18
1968						
PSB-BSP	15.03	34.51	27.09	15.15	34.72	26.88
Rode Leeuw	5.44		0.88	6.06		0.94
1971						
PSB-BSP	15.34	34.43	26.41	15.15	37.50	28.30
Rode Leeuw	5.18		0.82	3.03		0.47
1974						
PSB-BSP		34.43	21.86		37.14	23.11
PSB	15.14	2.39	3.12	17.64	1.42	3.30
BSP	4.26		1.65	2.94		1.41
1977						
PSB-BSP		34.59	22.14		40.00	24.05
PSB	11.79	2.66	2.61	14.70	1.42	2.83
BSP	4.62		1.69	2.94		1.88
PSB-RW		1.75	0.54		1.42	0.47
1978						
PSB	10.57	36.71	13.02	11.76	40.00	15.09
BSP	5.49		12.38	5.88		12.26
1981						
PS	9.54	36.21	12.72	11.76	44.28	16.50
SP	6.34		12.38	5.88		12.26
1985						
PS	11.27	39.45	13.76	12.12	44.92	16.50
SP	8.72	0.02	14.54	9.09		15.09
1987						
PS	15.48	43.94	15.64	18.18	49.27	18.86
SP	9.00		14.89	9.09		15.09
1991						
PS	11.49	39.16	13.48	12.12	44.92	16.51
SP	5.94		11.97	6.06		13.20
1995						
PS	11.49	33.70	11.87	9.09	39.58	14.00
SP	6.73		12.55	9.09		13.33

Source: Author's own compilation.

attempt did not last. In 1994, a further attempt was undertaken to establish a progressive cartel, aiming to unite, in the mind of its initiators, the Christian workers' movement, Agalev (the Flemish Green party), the progressive wing of the People's Union (*Volksunie*) and the SP. The crisis that shook the SP at the beginning of 1995 because of the alleged corruption of many of its leaders related to the Agusta and Dassault cases, as well as the elections of May 1995, effectively paralyzed this process, which has not been revived since.

On the French-speaking side, the PS remains slightly suspicious of any opening to include liberal Catholics or any other non-socialist progressive components of Belgian society. It remains closed off, due to its dominance in its geographical sphere and its almost hegemonic position on the left of the political spectrum (Delwit and De Waele 1997).

In the 1980s, the French-speaking PS made regionalism part of its identity, at the initiative of its new president, Guy Spitaels. A crucial and symbolic event was undeniably the presence of José Happart, hero of the 'Walloon combat', on the PS list at the European elections of 1984. He obtained 234,996 preference votes out of the 762 293 votes cast for the PS. Shortly afterwards, he joined the PS and was a member of its political staff until 1994 and remains one of the important personalities of the party. At the beginning of 1992, Guy Spitaels abandoned his position of president to become Prime Minister of the Walloon Regional Executive, a position from which he had to resign during the Agusta investigation. At the same time, Charles Picqué, an important socialist figure in Brussels, has occupied the position of Prime Minister of the Executive of the Brussels Region since 1989.

GOVERNMENT ACHIEVEMENTS AND CURRENT POLICIES

Since the return to power in 1988, socialists' priorities within government revolve around three main axes: the protection of the social security system, the federalization of Belgium, and the reduction of the public finances in order to meet the convergence criteria of the Maastricht Treaty. In the context of the economic deregulation that has been going on for nearly fifteen years, the PS and the SP have positioned themselves as the defenders of the existing social security system, even though there have been many cutbacks in the welfare state. It is therefore no surprise to note that the position of national, subsequently federal minister, of social affairs has been occupied by a socialist since 1988. The PS and SP have been two essential actors in the two state reforms of 1988 and in 1993 that led Belgium to become a Federal State.

Finally, as part of its continuous 'historic' position on Europe (Delwit, 1995), the PS and the SP have supported the Maastricht Treaty with

conviction, if not always with enthusiasm. Both have found themselves confronted with its implications, especially budgetary ones, since the public debt reached 125 per cent of the Gross National Product (GNP). But they have maintained their support for the strategy to meet the criteria. The budgetary deficit of 1997 reached exactly 3 per cent, and that of 1998 is expected to be 2.4 per cent.

In recent times, it is important to note a difficult contradiction that Belgian socialists have had to face together with their European counterparts. At all times, the PS and SP have wanted to support further progressive social reform, while at the same time defending existing state social benefits, which they present as the social aspect of progress. This double ambition was realizable in a period of economic boom when the 'social benefits' did not really need to be defended, and when further reform was merely part of the party's 'general fight for progress'. Since the mid-1970s, however, this strategy has appeared untenable. During this period, the parties were faced with the following problem: how to combine the role of a progressive and reforming party while, at the same time, identifying itself as the guardian of the existing welfare state. Should the party, and Guy Spitaels' work in 1990 hinted at this, integrate more strongly values less related to labour? This would create a situation in which socialist leaders would still have to solve this contradiction, at the same time as finding a basis capable of holding new claims which might sometimes appear to be against the immediate interests of the majority of its members and socialist electors.

The current sociological composition of the party and the lack of will to reform policy shows the difficulty involved in trying to solve this contradiction, but it is possible, should the party have the will to do it. The attitude of Belgian Socialists towards the 'ecotax' case during the 1992-3 coalition negotiations testifies to this.

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