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Crisis behind the Figures? Belgian Trade Unions between Strength, Paralysis and Revitalisation**

Unlike most of the trade unions in European countries, Belgian unions managed to preserve a high and stable union density, and strong institutional positions. However, their situation is not blissful and the condition of both the workforce and the unions has been worsening for three decades. This article looks at the strengths and weaknesses of Belgian unions and presents four initiatives of union revitalisation recently developed. The argument is that Belgian unions do not fully size the scope of the difficulties they face. Just like unions in other countries, Belgian unions attempting to develop initiatives of revitalisation have to overcome difficulties to operate their renewal.

Key words: **unions, unions' revitalization, industrial relations, crisis, Belgium**
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In Europe, most of the trade unions have been confronted with a decline in their membership for several decades. A small group of countries did not face that kind of evolution and even saw a (quasi) continuous growth of union density. In the so-called Ghent-system countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Sweden), the role played by the trade unions in the administration of unemployment schemes and in the day-to-day payment of the unemployment benefits have given them an important attractive power towards both stable and precarious workers. This is a major factor explaining the high union density in these countries (Western, 1997; Scruggs, 2002; Vandaele, 2006).

Nevertheless, the situation of the Belgian union confederations is not blissful and their future prospect is not as bright as it might seem. Their membership, especially the union activists, is quite old. Many workers become union members, for instance in order to access some services (e.g. receive unemployment benefits, legal counselling...) or to be protected if they face problems at work. But union membership is not synonymous with union activism. Belgian unions face important difficulties to effectively organise the precarious workers and those in the small and medium enterprises, whose number is rising, and to transform them into militants ready to enter collective action. They have lost much of their capacity to be heard through the medias and in the political field, even through the political parties historically close to them. Europeanisation, globalisation and new issues (environment…) confront them with new challenges. To a large extent, these problems are similar to those endured by union confederations in the neighbouring countries. However, the Belgian situation presents specific features. Linguistic and regional tensions affecting Belgium with more intensity in the last couple of years have several kinds of impact on trade unions. High union density also hides weaknesses of the trade union movement, making it more difficult for some representatives to become aware of the problems.

In this context, Belgian union confederations have lost part of their strength. To some extent, they even face a kind of paralysis. Trade unions have reacted variously. Some union federations try to retain their influence just doing "business as usual". Other sections have developed initiatives in order to renew their practices, to respond to the challenges they face and to stick to the evolution of their membership.

The aim of this article is to discuss different perspectives Belgian unions are exploring in order to renew their practices and to assess the chances of success of these initiatives and the obstacles they encounter. First I present the specificities of Belgian trade unions, especially focussing on the evolution of the membership and on the role these organisations play in the unemployment scheme, with all the consequences this involves. I then examine the main difficulties Belgian confederations face to improve the situation of the workers, to diffuse their message in the dominant discourse and to overcome their internal tensions. Finally, I look at four initiatives recently developed to insufflate new dynamics in union action and internal life and I try to discern the obstacles such initiatives have to face.

1. Strengths of Belgian trade unions

Since the 1980s, many scholars have been focussing on the loss of strength of trade unions in the aftermath of economic crisis begun in the previous decade. Declining

union densities in most of the Western countries, as well as shrinking capacities for mobilization drew attention on the difficulties and challenges trade unions had to face. Issues such as transforming industrial relations and changing unions (e.g. Van Ruysseveldt & Visser, 1996a; Ferner & Hyman, 1998) or – especially in the French literature – of crisis of trade unions (e.g. Mouriaux, 1986; Rosanvallon, 1988; Labbé & Croisat, 1992) have dominated academic debates on trade unions. In the last decade, the literature on trade unions focussed more than before on new initiatives developed by unions and new union perspectives explored by scholars have opened the way to studies of so-called revitalisation of trade unions (Frege & Kelly, 2004; Turner, 2005; Pernot, 2005; Phelan, 2007).

These debates have not involved Belgian trade unions very much. Belgium's union density remained at a very high level and even rose slightly, contrasting spectacularly with the neighbouring countries. From 1975 to 2008 union density in Grand Duchy of Luxemburg and in the Netherlands dropped from 46% and 38% respectively to 37% and 19% (ICTWSS, 2011). During the same period of time, union density in Belgium remained stable around 52%. This country is one of the five OECD members – along with Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway – where union density in 2008 was equal to or higher than in 1975.[1] In the other 29 OECD countries, union density declined, sometimes dramatically (ICTWSS, 2011). During the last decade, union density started to reduce even in some Nordic countries (Lind, 2004; Böckerman & Uusitalo, 2006; Visser, 2006; Kjellberg, 2009).[2] Belgium thus slowly appears to be one of the last OECD countries, and the only EU member state, where union density remains high (above 50%) and stable. What are the main features of Belgian trade unions and how is it possible to explain what is, at least apparently, an ongoing success?

Origins of Belgian trade unions

Three union confederations are active in Belgium. Since 1958, the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (ACV/CSC) is the most important one, with 1,665,217 members in 2010. The General Labour Federation of Belgium (ABVV/FGTB), which was set up in 1945 by Socialist, Communist and Anarcho-Syndicalist unions and which proclaims its Socialist philosophy, claimed to have 1,503,748 members in 2010. The small General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions in Belgium (ACLVB/CGSLB) had 274,308 members that year. Belgium is thus characterised by union pluralism, with two peculiarities: in no other European country a Christian confederation is the strongest trade union (Pasture, 1994, p. 38-39), and nowhere else in the world, a union confederation now presents itself as "liberal" (Vandaele, forthcoming).

Belgium is known to be a "pillarized country", as defined by Lorwin (1971) and Lijphart (1981). In such a "consociational democracy", different sociological "worlds" coexist, organising the people, from the cradle to the grave, in a dense network formed by a political party, a trade union confederation, cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, women organisations, youth movements, etc. In this model, political parties and trade unions of the same family are narrowly linked to each other, at least at the

1 For Iceland, data series start in 1979.

2 Union density remains more stable in Norway.

origins. In 1898, the (Socialist) Belgian Workers' Party (BWP) set up a trade union confederation aiming at gathering unions sharing its ideology based on the idea that class conflict is the central opposition in society. As a reaction, Catholic and Liberal organizations set up their own confederations in the following decades, centred on their own views, i.e. social Catholicism and social Liberalism respectively (Ebbinghaus et al., 2000, p. 112-118; Faniel, 2010a, p. 94-106).

Belgium was among the first countries to witness the development of industrial revolution in the 19th century. Heavy industries were concentrated in Wallonia, i.e. the Southern part of Belgium, and in some Flemish cities like Antwerp or Ghent; Brussels developed as a major financial centre. Most of the Flemish people at that time were peasants and also some parts of Wallonia remained rural. The French-speaking bourgeoisie dominated politics. Under the BWP's pressure, after several one-day general strikes and in the context of the end of the war and the Russian revolution, masculine universal suffrage was implemented in 1919 and right to strike and union activities became fully legalised in 1921, i.e. significantly later than in neighbouring countries, and quite late compared to Belgium's economic development.

Unemployment funds and their consequences on unions

The workers' condition was particularly miserable in the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century. Very low wages and legal constraints slowed down the organisation of the Belgian working class (Neuville, 1976, 1977). Hence many trade unions developed mutual aid funds in order to convince workers of the interest to pay subscriptions and to unionise. These funds included strike funds, but also opened access to retirement, sickness or unemployment benefits. From the end of the 19th century, this formula attracted a growing number of workers in union ranks. Union representatives therefore sought to reinforce these funds, especially those allocated to the unemployed, as they also aimed at limiting the downwards effects of the so-called "industrial reserve army" (Marx, 1867, chapter 25) on the wages and working conditions of people at work. Unions asked public authorities to allow subventions to these funds. With the help of their sister parties, they received complements at the local level[3] and, from 1921, at the national level (Vanthemsche, 1985, 1994). Along with the legalisation of union activities, the development of an unemployment scheme centred on trade unions largely contributed to the growth of union membership in Belgium during the interwar period.

In 1944, the unemployment scheme and other forms of social protection were gathered to form the Social Security. Since then, unemployment benefits no longer come from union subscriptions but only from contributions on wages levied by the National Social Security Office. Yet, the (Socialist) Minister for Employment decided that trade unions might continue to pay the unemployment benefits to their members

[3] For instance, the system created in 1900 in the city of Ghent, still known worldwide as Ghent system, was based on a special local fund managed by union representatives and local council members. This fund allocated a small unemployment benefit to every worker involuntarily made jobless and affiliated to an unemployment fund. If the worker was a trade union member, (s)he received his/her benefit through the union, as a complement of union's benefit.

(Faniel, 2009, pp. 106-107, 2010b). The public office set up to pay these benefits has never really challenged unions' position and about 88% of the unemployed are union members (Arcq & Aussems, 2002, p. 36). So far, this remains a strong explaining factor of high union density in Belgium (Van Rie, Marx, & Horemans, 2011).

This historical evidence is also a clear example of close links between unions and political parties: trade unions support sister parties in their struggle for power, for instance by promoting their ideas – and sometimes even their candidates – during the electoral campaigns, and the political parties try to reinforce trade unions' positions when and where they are in the office (Taylor, 1989, pp. 45-49 and 70; Valenzuela, 1992, p. 60; Alaluf, 1999, p. 227). The way Belgian unemployment scheme developed also influenced trade unions' characteristics. Unions reinforced their position and their integration in the capitalist society. This process accelerated union tendencies to bureaucratise in the double meaning of the term: on the one hand, it made them stronger as more workers became members and unions were forced and enabled to reinforce their staff. But on the other hand, managing unemployment funds also required very much time – time that could not be dedicated to more militant actions – , put union representatives under pressures urging them to act as "responsible" managers of public funds, and involved them in meetings where political and business representatives promoted class collaboration. Moreover, new members, especially in periods of crisis, appeared to be somewhat passive members rather than confirmed militants. From a historical perspective, the features of the unemployment scheme thus exerted strong deradicalising effects on Belgian trade unions.

Unions' representativeness

Involvement in the administration and payment of public unemployment funds is a significant example of the institutional role Belgian unions developed before and even more strongly after WWII. But it is not the sole institutional position they hold. The "Draft Agreement on Social Solidarity" negotiated clandestinely by unions and management representatives set the foundations of the socio-economic Belgian model to be implemented after the war (Luyten & Vanthemsche, 1995; Alaluf, 1999). Following this so-called "Social Pact", unions and employers' organisations are represented in many official advisory bodies: the different domains of social security system, Central Economic Council, National Labour Council and various social and economic bodies.

The "Social Pact" also marked a double recognition. Trade unions agreed that "issues such as capital investment and rationalization, and work organization are the exclusive prerogative of management" (Van Ruysseveldt & Visser, 1996b, p. 235). Employers recognised trade unions "as the sole representatives of employee interests in collective bargaining and in works councils" (ibid.). Hence, since 1960, along with the employers' organisations, union confederations negotiate (usually every two years) multi-industry and sectoral agreements that the Minister for Employment may recognized legally. Belgian unions too are strongly grounded at company level in the private and public sectors. In the private sector, committees for prevention and protection in the workplace are set up in companies with 50 workers or more, and works councils are present where at least 100 workers are in activity. These institutions gather representatives chosen by the management and workers elected by their colleagues. Except

for staff workers, only the three union confederations are allowed to present candidates for so-called "social elections" held every four years to choose these workers' representatives. These two institutions legally have to be informed and consulted by companies' management on several social and economic issues affecting the workers (Van Ruysseveldt & Visser, 1996b, pp. 235-249; Vilrokx & Van Leemput, 1998, pp. 319-327; Arcq et al., 2010). Depending on specific sectoral rules, unions may also introduce a trade union delegation in some companies of the private or the public sectors.

At the political level, the links between unions and their sister parties changed a lot since the origins (Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010, p. 32). The ACLVB/CGSLB gave up its links with the Liberal Party when Liberal ministers approved the law that provoked the 1960-61 general strike – the longest general strike in Belgium's history[4] – and led an electoral campaign on slogans hostile to unions. Nevertheless, a kind of philosophical and sociological proximity (Faniel et al., 2011) still exists with some Liberal politicians. The ACV/CSC still maintains close contacts with politicians of both the Flemish Christian Party (CD&V) and the French-speaking Centre Party (CDH), but this confederation enlarged its relations to Socialist as well as Green politicians, especially on the French-speaking side and in the last decade, when Christian parties were rejected in the opposition during two legislatures after more than 50 years in the national government. Among the three union confederations, the ABVV/FGTB appears to be the union which has remained the closest to its original sister party. Though official links with the Socialist Party were abandoned in 1945, when the Socialist union merged with Communist and other unions, many union professionals are members of the Flemish (SP.A) or of the French-speaking (PS) Socialist parties,[5] or at least develop personal contacts with politicians of these parties. Every union confederation thus has close contacts with politicians from local to national levels. Since Belgian governments are coalition governments, at least one of the two major union confederations has links with some ministers.

Thanks to these positions and characteristics, Belgian trade unions can rely on an important number of professionals, on a dense network of representatives and activists, as well as on a high and stable union density. They retain important capacities for mobilisation, enabling them to organise demonstrations and strikes without too many difficulties. Unions are represented in various institutions where they can present their views. They play major societal roles and they can also try to influence political deci-

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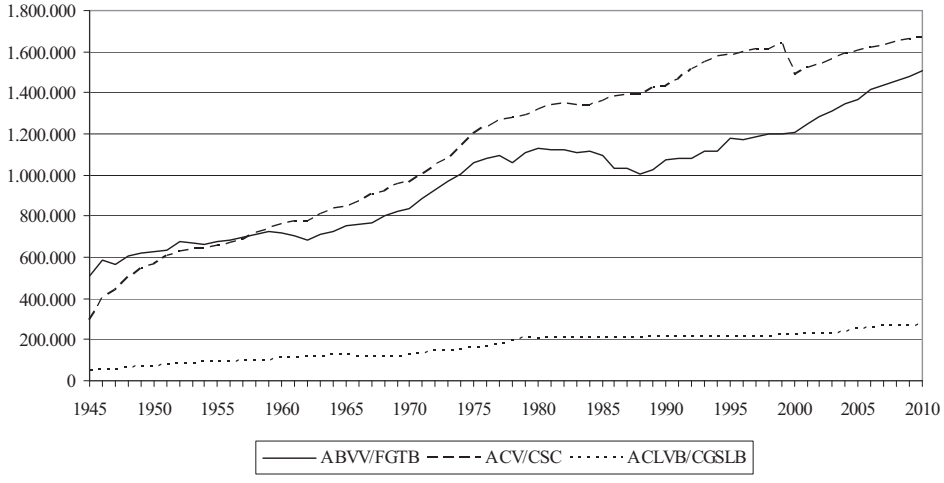
4 The *loi unique*, resulting from a deal between the Christian Party and the Liberal Party, gathered very different austerity measures (concerning public services, unemployment indemnification, pension rights, indirect taxation...) in a single law project, provoking a large national strike movement during five weeks. In spite of a huge mobilisation, most of the measures were adopted and implemented, even by the next government where the Socialists (who supported the strike movement) had replaced the Liberals.

5 From 1968 to 1978, all three major political parties (Christian Party, Liberal Party afterwards and finally Socialist Party) split into a Flemish party and a French-speaking party. Green and extreme-right parties appeared later, on linguistically separate bases. Nowadays, only some very small left-wing parties remain national parties.

sions through their political contacts. In spite of union pluralism, confederations often try to adopt common positions on major issues and to act jointly in a strategy of so-called "common front".

Figure 1: Union membership in Belgium 1945-2010



Note: in 2000, ACV/CSC changed its methodology, therefore reducing the figure of membership; the hiatus observed that year does not reflect a real loss of members.

The features of Belgium, its economy and its industrial relations – i.e. small country, very open economy, high productivity, highly skilled labour force, relatively equal distribution of income, high union density, well-structured collective bargaining system, unions and employers' organisations associated to political decision making process – make that country a typical case of small state in Katzenstein's view (1985), as well as an example of coordinated market economy (CME) in the sense of Hall and Soskice's *Varieties of Capitalism* (2001, pp. 19-21). Both typologies stress the importance of stable political and social relations in such a case. Traditionally, social actors are more likely to seek compromises together than try to impose their views using disruptive strategies. Such a configuration also explains why, even in conditions of economic crisis, unions retain a major institutional role in political and social decision making process. At first glance, Belgian trade unions thus seem to be strong organizations and institutionally well-integrated actors.

2. Away from trade unions' crisis?

Such a picture can seem idyllic. However, Belgian unions also face important difficulties. Recently, the president of the ACV/CSC pointed out the danger of taking this apparently good situation at face value and of staying blind towards real challenges all unions have to face (Cortebeeck, 2010).

Socioeconomic indicators

In the early 1970s, Belgium was touched by the economic crisis. Unemployment grew rapidly: it doubled between the beginning and the end of 1975 and it increased five-folds in a decade (Faniel, 2009, p. 107-108). The effects of downsizings and firms' closures were reinforced by the massive arrival of young and female workers on labour market. In the last three decades, unemployment rate oscillated between 7.8% and 11.6% of active population. In Brussels and in Wallonia, unemployment rate is much higher, especially for youth and women workers.

Non-standard employment, often associated with precariousness, developed: part-time jobs increased from 4.9% of all salaried jobs in 1977 to 23.8% in 2006 (40% among female workers); fixed-term contracts and temporary work developed, especially for young people – temporary work increased six-folds from 1985 till 2004.

Wage increases were severely moderated. Hence wages' share in Belgian GDP climbed from 48% in 1971 to 57% in 1981 but fell back to 49% in 2001 (Plasman et al., 2008, p. 6). Social security benefits also shrank. For instance, in 1980 the average rate of unemployment benefit was equivalent to 41.6% of average gross earnings in the private sector; this replacement rate had dropped to 21.7% in 2004 (Faniel 2010b). Nowadays, mean unemployment benefit lags behind the poverty threshold.

Political and ideological withdrawal

This socioeconomic evolution is linked to economic globalisation and the underlying logic of profit maximisation. It was also pushed by a clear change in economic policy. In 1981, Christian and Liberal parties formed a new coalition which implemented a program often described as neoliberal. The government realised many claims of the employers' organisations. From the early 1970s, employers strongly promoted a typically neoliberal discourse, asserting the centrality of enterprises in the creation of prosperity, the necessity to reduce so-called "social charges" and "wage costs", the need for downsizing public administration, and the will to reduce unions' influence (Moden & Sloover, 1980). Progressively, this discourse became dominant ideology, spread by mass-medias. Under this offensive, unions slowly lost much of their influence, especially at ideological level. The disappearance of every newspaper close to unions probably played an important role in this decline.

At the institutional level, the government set new rules and assigned new goals to collective bargaining, or even bypassed social actors for some major decisions. Under that pressure, collective bargaining significantly evolved and wage bargaining more and more focused on companies' needs for competitiveness. Unions reacted differently. On the one hand, top leaders of the ACV/CSC chose to negotiate with the government the details of the reforms implemented from 1981 to 1987. On the other hand, ABVV/FGTB, whose sister parties were in the opposition, strongly opposed to these reforms but did not forsake collective bargaining when it remained active. Those evolutions partly confirm Katzenstein's and Hall and Soskice's views: when a small CME faces an important economic crisis, public authorities and social actors are rather likely to try to maintain stable social relations in order to preserve prosperity. But evidence also shows that not all actors are equally linked to social partnership.

Due to tactical (position of the sister parties) as well as to ideological divergences, ACV/CSC and ABVV/FGTB chose partially different ways.

Rejection of social partnership at any cost also brought the ABVV/FGTB to refuse participating in a new "Social Pact" in 1993, although Socialist parties where governing along with Christian parties (the ACV/CSC adopted a mitigated position). That situation illustrates a major difference between so-called small states: in the Netherlands, for instance, social actors concluded such social pacts already in the 1980s. Those decades also showed a weakening in Belgian unions' position, including towards their sister parties. In 1993, as well as in 2005 around the major reform of early retirement scheme or in 2011 against the multi-industry draft agreement, union confederations (without the ACV/CSC in 2011) organised one-day general strikes with mass demonstrations. But the governments, whatever their political colour, maintained their decisions almost unchanged. This evidence questions unions' capacity to transform major social mobilisations into political results. It also challenges Belgium's position in Katzenstein's as well as in Hall & Soskice's typologies since major reforms were adopted in a context of important social tensions and failing collective bargaining.[6]

Linguistic and regional tensions

Belgium is also characterised by important linguistic and regional tensions, with economic and political dimensions. These tensions have had strong repercussions on trade unions (Pasture, 2000). Although all three confederations have remained national organisations up to now, their internal structures evolved in order to stick to institutional changes (e.g. teachers' unions are linguistically separated since education depends on the Communities), but also sometimes because linguistic and regional tensions entered into union debates. On several issues, Walloon and Flemish union leaders have different sensibilities, or even divergent views. This gives rise to internal tensions and latent or open conflicts.

In the ACV/CSC and in the ACLVB/CGSLB, more than 60% of the membership comes from Flanders, and Walloon as well as Brussels' representatives sometimes feel minorised on important decisions. For instance, several Walloon sections of ACV/CSC sectoral unions disapproved the 2011-2012 multi-industry draft agreement. A majority of the ACV/CSC representatives approved this project. Many Walloon representatives fulminated against their national (i.e. Flemish) leaders whose vote did not reflect their opposition against the project. In 1984, Walloon ACV/CSC members even demonstrated with their ABVV/FGTB colleagues to contest economic measures decided by the centre-right government, although these measures were supported by ACV/CSC's top leaders. Nevertheless, Walloon members generally have to bow under their Flemish colleagues' pressure.

Walloon sections are less minorised in the ABVV/FGTB. Hence, internal tensions are often greater than in the other two confederations. Moreover, ideology based

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6 For other differences between Belgium and the Netherlands' industrial relations systems, as well as critical comments on Katzenstein's perception of those two countries, see Van Ruysseveldt & Visser, 1996b: pp. 206-208.

on class conflict does not contribute to soften internal oppositions as do ideologies promoting peaceful relations in the case of the ACV/CSC and the ACLVB/CGSLB internal relations. ABVV/FGTB metalworkers' federation was subject to more and more internal conflicts (on ideological and strategic choices but also at the interpersonal level). It split in 2006 into two linguistically distinct federations. Union representatives of other sectoral federations wonder if their confederation is not condemned to follow the same path. The congress held by the ABVV/FGTB in June 2010 evacuated major contested issues. Though such a strategy enabled the Socialist confederation to preserve its unity, it also gave the impression that divergent views and regional tensions slowly come to paralyse the union decision making process and reduce its capacity to adopt clear and strong positions.

Questioning union structures

Behind good figures of union density, Belgian confederations thus face different kinds of problems. This also includes difficulties linked to the evolution of their membership and to the characteristics of their internal structures. As elsewhere, trade unions in Belgium have to deal with growing diversity among the workforce. White collar workers are far more numerous than in the past but their union density is much lower than that of blue collar workers (Arcq & Aussems, 2002, p. 18-19). An important question for white collar unions is: How to develop union militancy with these workers? On another point, according to two recent surveys, union membership is older than 45 years of mean age (FGTB Luxembourg, 2010; Faniel et al., 2011). Unlike in many countries, Belgian unions attract lots of young people arriving on labour market. But it is essentially because these people are looking for jobs and they come to unions in order to register as unemployed. An important, often unanswered question is: How to retain these young members when they find stable jobs, and, one step further, how to transform them into real union activists? This type of question also applies to casual or temporary workers, with all difficulties their situation implies for union strategies.

The organisation even of trade unions is under pressure. The small ACLVB/CGSLB excepted, Belgian confederations are structured on a double base, around sectoral unions – so-called "centrals", one or two for white collar workers, one for workers from the public sector, and several unions for blue collar workers – and interprofessional regional sections. A recent survey (FGTB Luxembourg, 2010) shows that many members are not aware of the internal complexity of their union. Nevertheless, tensions around the issue of union boundaries bring many union representatives to dedicate – some say: to waste – much energy and time to questions of internal organisation. Some reflections are developed on the necessity to draw links between white collar workers and blue collar workers beyond the specificities of both statuses. Reflections focus too on the ways to connect workers of a main company and workers of its subcontractors and to make union representatives work jointly beyond union boundaries. However, evidence also shows that much more pragmatic and daily questions, or even conflicts, take union representatives' time, such as determining which sectoral union may organise specific parts of a precise company's workforce.

3. Attempts of revitalisation

In spite of a high and stable union density, a good implantation at company level and preserved institutional positions, Belgian unions face tensions and difficulties. To some extent, historical strengths and persisting features can operate as a smoke screen, hiding to many union representatives their own weaknesses and the deep causes of the difficulties they face both in their daily experience and at a broad economic and socio-political level. However, some unions have developed strategies likely to revitalise their action through different means. In this last section, I briefly present four initiatives developed recently by unions willing to improve their efficiency in order to better satisfy their members and/ or more broadly to reinforce their action. Along with other researchers, I was associated to three of them. This position enabled me to become a privileged observer for these three initiatives. I add a fourth example to this study in order to present cases from each of the three confederations. Two cases concern national unions and two are of subnational dimension; two concern sectoral unions and two concern interprofessional unions. I discuss the kind of revitalisation they illustrate and I point to some difficulties they have to face.

Types of union revitalisation

Several studies dedicated to union revitalisation make a distinction between two sets of reactions. Turner synthetically puts it: "One useful distinction, at the broadest level of generalization, is between labour movements that focus revitalization effects on *mobilization*, and those that focus on *institutional position* and/ or reform" (2004, pp. 6-7). Looking at the ways unions try to recover legitimacy, Dufour and Hege (2010, pp. 363-364) distinguish two possible and not mutually exclusive responses. The first response "consists in rationalizing the trade union role on the basis of existing orientations and strengths. Trade unions devote a significant portion of their energies to ensuring the operation and defence of the institutions that serve the current processes of interest mediation." In this perspective, "the core challenge for unions is to manage their interface with their core membership and with those other actors who guarantee their external recognition". The second response "focuses first and foremost on the need to reconstitute the trade union rank-and-file. According to this view, unions must perceive as a major challenge the fragmentation of labour markets and the resulting divide (…). This view emphasizes the limits of past institutional gains and their internal modes of debate in the light of the chasm that separates them from large sections of the labour force."

Dufour and Hege underline the strengths of these two series of responses, but they also point to some difficulties these two ways can encounter. In the first case, the risk is that unions see their base shrink, with possible consequences on their representative capacity and on their external legitimacy. The second response "requires that the actors freely choose to stand back and reconsider exactly what they are there for. It presupposes release from the expectations of many of their fellow trade unionists, sometimes those most firmly committed to previous definitions of trade union struggle. It gives rise, inevitably, to internal conflicts."

Cases

The General Central (AC/CG) is the ABVV/FGTB sectoral union for blue collar workers employed (or formerly employed, or unemployed) in building, chemical, glass, wood or other industries. The AC/CG gathers about 380,000 workers and is the second biggest union affiliated to the Socialist union. The AC/CG has historically been viewed as quite a reformist, or even a conservative union inside the ABVV/FGTB. In many of the industries where the AC/CG operates, strikes are not frequent; the union developed important leisure centres and owes an important real estate; unlike the metalworkers' federation or the public sector union, the AC/CG refused to call for a general strike in 1960. The AC/CG celebrated its 100th birthday in 2009. In this perspective, the union leaders asked scholars to prepare a collective volume dedicated not so much to an analysis of the difficulties unions face but rather aiming at proposing suggestions to revitalise union action in various fields, from local to international action, at ideological or organising levels (Faniel et al., 2009). Chapters proposed reflexion on programmatic issues (minimum wage, social security, collective working time reduction, preservation of environment, protection of health…), on unions' action to integrate peculiar members (female, youth, unemployed or undocumented workers) and on union's strategy (union militancy in SME's, networking strategies, use of strike or relationship with mass-medias and political actors). Such an initiative reflects quite an open-minded conception of union action, since the authors of the book were chosen outside unions and were free to make whatever broad or pragmatic suggestions they thought important to present, even if they contrasted with this union's traditional positions or diverged from them. The book was largely distributed and the AC/CG organised debates on various chapters, first with the union professionals, then in all regional sections with local union activists.

The FGTB Luxembourg is the interprofessional section gathering ABVV/FGTB's sectoral unions in the Belgian province of Luxemburg (in the south of Belgium). The FGTB Luxembourg gathers about 35,000 workers and is one of the smallest regional sections of the Socialist union. The Secretary decided to hold a congress in 2010 aiming at defining the union orientations. A large survey was conducted among the members in order to screen their profile, to evaluate their satisfaction towards the union and to perceive their aspirations. Decentralised workshops were organised to involve rank-and-file members in the definition of the orientations. Finally, the congress approved a 76-points program of action for the next years, ranging from the promotion of clear ideological statements (insisting on the need for social and tax justice, strong social security scheme, public services…) to very pragmatic reforms of the internal functioning of the union (in order to improve internal communication, regularity of meetings…).

The 2008 ACLVB/CGSLB congress insisted on the necessity to evaluate the members' satisfaction towards the functioning and the actions of the Liberal union. In 2010, a large survey was conducted among the affiliates who are employed in or retired from the private sector or who are unemployed. The results give a precise idea of the members' profile and they show good satisfaction rates towards the services proposed by the ACLVB/CGSLB. They also provide a clear vision of the claims mem-

bers put forward: employment security, wages and working conditions (Faniel et al., 2011). Globally these results confirm the ACLVB/CGSLB leaders' options and they reflect the positioning of this union as a service-provider and a promoter of peaceful industrial relations.

The National Central of White Collar Workers (CNE) organises the French-speaking white collar workers affiliated to the ACV/CSC. It gathers about 160,000 workers employed (or formerly employed, or unemployed) in Wallonia or in Brussels in all kinds of private companies. The CNE held a congress in 2010 defining the union orientations for the coming years. The CNE is often perceived as the most left union within the ACV/CSC. The combination of its multi-industry character and of the fact that it is only a French-speaking union probably explains why the positions of this union are more radical than that of other ACV/CSC unions who defend more sectional interests or where the French-speaking members have to compose with more conservative Flemish colleagues. The congress deeply criticised the functioning of the economic and political system itself, it aimed at defining the kind of democracy the CNE wants to implement and the tools this union can use to struggle for these objectives. For many years, the CNE has been insisting on the claim of collective working time reduction, although this historical claim disappeared from the resolutions of the ACV/CSC during the 1980s. In its monthly journal, the CNE publishes articles presenting its analysis of selected economic and social issues, clearly presenting a critical vision contesting dominant ideology.

Table 1: Characteristics of the cases

Case	Type of union	Type of affiliates	Number of affiliates	National confederation	Geographical scope	Main initiatives for revitalisation
AC/CG	Sectoral union	Blue collar workers, private sector (building, chemical, glass, wood or other industries)	380,000	ABVV/FGTB	Country	Collective volume by scholars used as base for reflection with militants
FGTB Luxembourg	Interprofessional union	All workers	35,000	ABV/FGTB	Province	Survey, reflection with militants and congress of orientation
ACLVB/ CGSLB	Interprofessional union	All workers	275,000	ACLVB/ CGSLB	Country	Survey
CNE	Sectoral union	White collar workers, private sector	160,000	ACV/CSC	French-speaking area	Congress and critical articles in union journal

All four cases involve, at a moment of the process, union members on an active manner: during the preparation of the congress in the cases of FGTB Luxembourg and of CNE, through debates on the book in the case of the AC/CG, and in the surveys of the ACLVB/CGSLB and of the FGTB Luxembourg. The FGTB Luxembourg, the CNE and the AC/CG also pay attention to structural transformations of the workforce and to the consequences these evolutions exert on unions, especially thinking on

the ways to mobilise white collar, women, young, unemployed or undocumented workers, or people working in SMEs – whose figure is growing. As a response, some actions were already launched, such as appointing union officials to focus on sectors generally considered as difficult to organise. However, it is too early to observe fully how these reflections will be translated into concrete initiatives. With these elements, the initiatives of the FGTB Luxembourg, the CNE and the AC/CG appear as attempts to renovate union ideology in order to open way to mobilisation strategies. But these initiatives are still at their starting point and it is difficult to say if they will be able to develop this kind of strategy on the long-term. Things are different for the ACLVB/CGSLB initiative, whose aim when organising a members' survey was to evaluate its services and to gain new members rather than remobilising its current affiliates.

On another hand, the four unions do not set aside their need for external legitimacy. As pointed above, Belgian unions are recognised as legitimate actors by the state and by employers in lots of different institutions. All four unions therefore develop reflections on the attitude they should adopt towards the state and the employers, but also towards political parties or so-called new social movements. Although they can lean on their institutional position to retain their capacity for attracting members, these four unions do not seek to conclude agreements with management or with public authorities at all costs. For instance, all these unions rejected the 2011-2012 multi-industry draft agreement prepared by employers' and unions' top leaders – including the president of the ACLVB/CGSLB and the top leaders of the ABVV/FGTB, whose organisations finally rejected the proposition. The choice of the four unions shows that they are not ready to uncritically preserve social peace. However, the rejection of the proposition did not severely threatened the unions' institutional position. Moreover, it does not mean that these unions are ready to modify deeply and quickly their long established practices including social dialogue.

The four initiatives of revitalisation presented above find their origins in a reflection on the evolution of unions, industrial relations and Belgian society at large. They involved their members through different processes, sometimes using academic expertise as a complement, in order to evaluate and to adapt their organisation and their standpoints. These initiatives thus comprise an important dimension of involvement of the rank-and-file (through debates, workshops or surveys) and they aim at enlarging the unions' bases and internal legitimacy. Nevertheless, they do not neglect the preservation of their institutional positions and the resources – including recognition – these positions provide them. But they do not appear as focusing primarily on these positions in order to renew their legitimacy. It thus seems possible to consider these cases as examples of the second type of response described by Dufour and Hege (2010). However, one has to distinguish the ACLVB/CGSLB's initiative, which seems less preoccupied than the other three cases with growing diversification among the workforce. From this point of view, the ACLVB/CGSLB case seems closer to the first kind of response, trying to match its internal legitimacy with its institutional recognition.

Difficulties of revitalisation

Although it is too early to draw definitive lessons from these four recent and ongoing experiences, it is already possible to discern some difficulties these initiatives will have to overcome.

Such initiatives have to be borne collectively by a large part of the concerned union's leaders. Conflicts between leaders are likely to block initiatives or to reduce their impact. If the initiative is only one person's work, it can also be vulnerable. The FGTB Luxembourg's project was built by a small team around the local Secretary. Shortly after the congress, the Secretary fell ill during several months. Although they had been adopted by the organisation, the resolutions went unheeded during that period, no one feeling committed to or allowed to implementing these resolutions. Things really started to change when that person came back.

On another hand, like in other European countries, attempts of revitalisation are not developed by all unions. Unions choosing such a way have to deal with inertia, or even oppositions of other unions within their own confederation. Their strategic choices can appear to be conflicting. For instance, the rejection of the 2011-2012 multi-industry draft agreement by the CNE contrasted with its ratification by a majority of other ACV/CSC sectoral unions. While the former considered the propositions were causing major damage to the conditions of employment of white collar workers without improving those of blue collar workers, the latter preferred to sign an agreement preserving the frame of well-established peaceful industrial relations, even if the concrete results for the workers were poor or even damaging. This opposition clearly reflects the two possible ways unions can develop in order to preserve or reconstruct their legitimacy, according to Dufour and Hege (2010). During the following weeks, the leaders of the CNE were caught between their confederation's approval of the agreement and the strikes and demonstrations led by the other two confederations, which had rejected the proposition. This delicate position forced the CNE to operate difficult choices on several occasions between its loyalty to its confederation or its fidelity to its strategic and ideological options.

4. Conclusion

Belgian unions' characteristics described in the first section, as well as the four cases of union revitalisation presented could give a misleading impression of unions living in a blissful situation. Although they have preserved stronger positions than their counterparts in most of the European countries, Belgian unions too face very important difficulties to transform their claims into successes. This clearly appears when looking at the evolution of the workers' situation, at unions' capacities for influencing policies – even those developed by political parties historically close to them – or at unions' capacities to counter dominant ideology (e.g. in the mass-media). But stable union density and still growing figures of membership enable most of the Belgian unions to leave the issue of revitalisation aside. Although they are real, the four initiatives described in this article are thus quite marginal at the scale of the whole Belgian union movement. This kind of marginality adds to their difficulties since they are sometimes confronted with the inertia of other unions.

At the organisational level, Belgian unions have been able to resist quite efficiently, so far, to the crisis affecting unions throughout Europe – and even beyond. But many union representatives are aware that a deep modification of the unions' institutional bases could restrict their capacities for attraction on workers. Some of them continue to do "business as usual", standing firmly on their positions and playing their traditional part in industrial relations. Others try to explore ways of union revitalisation. But, as Dufour and Hege (2010) point it, both ways are risky: in the absence of global vision of society and with shrinking capacities for mobilisation, the first way exposes unions to repeated retreats; the second is fragile because it depends on several actors' reactions, both within and outside the concerned union. In Belgium, where figures of union density are good, the first attitude is quite seducing. But it partly explains the difficulties presented in the second section. Attempts to revitalise unions as presented in the third section probably are more promising in the long-term. But they are also more difficult to implement.

In order to become successful, the initiatives presented above will have to remain alive on the long run. They also need to be joined and encouraged by similar initiatives set up by other unions, both at national and at European levels. Unlike most of their colleagues in Europe, the Belgian trade unions have retained an important membership and strong institutional positions. If they are to recover some of the influence they lost in the last three decades and to improve the balance of power for the Belgian workers at large, they need to enter an intense reflexion on their strengths and on their weaknesses, as did the four unions mentioned in the third section. They have to rethink their major objectives, adopt a more offensive discourse towards public authorities' measures and employers' organisations ideology in order to leave their defending attitude, diffuse their ideas among and beyond their members, and use their influence to spread an ideology centred on social justice and solidarity in order to invert the political and electoral course taken during the last years.

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