

"La peur du rouge:" Communist Action Committees in the Port of Antwerp during the 1930s and 1940s.¹

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La crainte du communisme a été un facteur dans tous les aspects du travail des débardeurs d'Anvers, de la Crise de 1929 jusqu'à dans les années 1950. Cet article revoit premièrement les origines des syndicats ouvriers dans le port et étudie ensuite la montée du communisme. Dans la période immédiate après la libération, le Parti Communiste de la Belgique occupait plusieurs postes ministériels; les communistes et les socialistes étaient encouragés à travailler ensemble. Les rapports restaient tout de même difficiles et la crainte du communisme était répandue parmi le leadership du syndicat des ouvriers du transport belge. A l'aide de documents archivés, cet article évalue à quel point la menace du communisme était réelle ainsi que l'étendue de sa véritable influence.

The immediate postwar period is definitely one of the most colourful periods for labour relations in the port of Antwerp. A small fraction of communist sympathizers among the Antwerp dockers questioned both the process of collective bargaining and the role of the traditional port trade unions. This paper examines the impact that the presence and actions of communist Action Committees during the 1930s and 1940s had on the policy of the largest trade union namely the socialist Belgian Transport-workers' Union (BTU) which represented around 80 per cent of the 15,000 Antwerp dockers. Assessing the abstract concept of "impact" of the Action Committee poses some methodological problems. What is "impact"? How is it measured? When or at what time is it measured? One of the most obvious indications of the impact of the Action Committee on the official trade union could be their capacity or ability to mobilize the dockers in a movement against their own union and its

¹ This paper was first presented at International Maritime Economic History Association's "Maritime History Beyond 2000: Visions of Sea and Shore. An international conference on maritime history and heritage," Fremantle, Australia, 11-14 December 2001.

officials. Such a "spontaneous" - one not called by the leadership - movement or wildcat strike could symbolize a clear antagonism between rank and file and the official leadership. However we can differ in opinion on what such a movement or strike is telling us and to what extent we can qualify this spontaneous movement as a token of impact. How do we interpret or study such a wildcat strike?

The use of official or unofficial strike statistics could tell us something about the mobilization power of a break-away movement against the official union and its leaders. However, using only strike statistics offers us a very limited view on the impact of the Action Committee on the B T U and its leaders. Several arguments can be brought forward. First of all we can point to some arguments used to judge the practicability of quantitative tools in social history as a whole.² One aspect in the still continuing dispute between believers and non-believers is the methodology of the data used or assembled in these strike statistics.³ The degree of compatibility and the completeness of the set of data brought together by quantitative social historians on which they base their conclusions is often a point of disagreement and for the non-believers the easiest way to doubt the quality of the article, its findings and the quantitative approach as a whole. Even if we come to an agreement on a common material and a common technology to assemble and handle the data, the quantitative approach and the use of strike-statistics, questions still arise which are closely related to the nature of the process we want to examine.⁴

A rather large group of historians make a strong plea for a qualitative approach instead of a quantitative approach because of the complexity of things. They believe it is impossible to cover fully the specificity of a historical process within a quantitative framework.⁵ The final argument - and my main argument - against a quantitative approach and the use of strike statistics follows logically from this last argument. Industrial relations

² The following comments on the use of a qualitative or quantitative approach in social history and their pros and cons are based on (selection): L. Griffin, M. Van der Linden, "Introduction" in L. Griffin, M. Van der Linden (eds.), *International Review of Social History*, XLHI, 1998, supplement "New methods on social history," 3-8; J. Reynolds, "Do historians count anymore? The status of quantitative methods in history," *Historical Methods*, XXXI, 1998, 141-48; J.A. Hartog, M.C.J. Bongers-Huizer, "Quantitatieve methoden in de geschiedenis: nog eens ..." *Economisch en sociaal-historisch jaarboek*, XLVU, 1984, 13-22; E. Johnson, "Counting how it really was: quantitative history in West-Germany," *Historical Methods*, XXI, 1988, 2, 61-79; R. Floud, "Quantitative history and people's history: two methods in conflict?," *History Workshop Journal*, XVI, 1984, 113-24; J.M. Kousser, "The revivalism of narrative: a response to recent criticisms of quantitative history," *Social Science History*, VHJ, 1984, 2, 133-150; C. Tilly, L. Tilly, R. Tilly, "European economic and social history in the 1990s," *Journal of European Economic History*, XX, 1991, 3, 645-71.

³ In their work on strikes in France, Shorter and Tilly go into detail on the use of strike statistics and their pros and cons. E. Shorter, C. Tilly, *Strikes in France 1830-1968*, (Cambridge, 1974), 428.

⁴ E. Scheuch, "Quantitative analysis of historical material as the basis for a new cooperation between history and sociology," *Historical social research*, XIU, 2, 5-30; K. Jarausch, "The role of quantitative methods in history: decline or reawakening?," *Storia del storiografia*, XVHJ, 1990, 43-60.

⁵ C.C. Ragin, "The logic of qualitative comparative analysis," *International review of social history*, XLHI, 1998, supplement "New methods on social history," 105-24.

and conflicts - as just one aspect of these industrial relations - are very dynamic: they are determined by actions of two or more actors. Strike statistics however reflect little or none of these dynamics. They do reflect certain swings or moods in the participation or mobilization process during a strike but tell us nothing about the motives, the other actor (the employers' side or in this case the union leadership) and the (formal and informal) negotiating process during the strike. Roberto Franzosi summarized the shortcomings of official strike statistics as follows: "The danger of using official strike counts is to produce a one-sided and distorted view of social conflict where only one of the social actors involved, act. Yet, if it takes two to tango, it takes at least two to fight."⁶ The unsupported use of strike statistics would also lead to a distorted picture of working class strategies. If these strike statistics were the only data we took into account we would reduce protest tactics to strikes only. It is however clear that strikes are but one form of protest tactics within a far wider repertoire. Any break-away movement trying to protest against the official leadership will have other means or ways to show their disagreement. A decision with far-reaching consequences as calling a strike will be just one, possibly the final, option.

In addition to the fact that we should not reduce the discussion of impact to a simple look at mobilization power and strike statistics there are others reasons why I have eventually chosen a qualitative approach. Strike statistics only tell us something about the power or impact of a certain movement for a very limited period of time (that is the actual striking period). What happens when the strike is over? Does impact or power stop at the end of the strike? It would, on the contrary, be interesting to see what the long-term effects of this or that strike or the pressure group that lay at the basis of it would be. In other words, the impact (or the degree to which they are able to influence the policy process) of the breakaway movement is not only determined by the degree to which their demands are met in order to end the strike in the short-term, but also by how the union leadership perceives this movement in the long-term and is itself "lead" by the presence of this movement when changing directions.

It should be clear when looking at impact we that opt for a broad view of things, broad meaning a long period of time rather than the duration of one strike and a variety of fields or events, not just temporary "accidents" as strikes. Intangible and abstract as it may be, we should also pay attention to a subjective phenomenon as "fear": the fear of a certain movement, where the subjective perception of a phenomenon does not necessarily stand in relation with the objective dimension of that phenomenon, can lead to a change of course by the union leaders and can thus also be considered as impact. Therefore I have opted for a more in-depth analysis of industrial relations in the Antwerp port during the period 1930-49. Based on research into official and unofficial notes and reports on formal and informal meetings of

⁶ R. Franzosi, "Narrative as data: linguistic and statistical tools for the quantitative study of historical events," *International review of social history*, XLHI, 1998, supplement "New methods on social history", 98. See also: R. Franzosi, "Mobilization and counter-mobilization processes: from the red years to the black years in Italy. A new methodological approach to the study of narrative data," in J. Mohr, R. Franzosi (eds.), *Theory and society*, XXVI, 1997, Special issue "New directions in formalization and historical analysis," 2-3.

the B T U and the employers' federations, I want first to identify the main items of discussion between the B T U official leadership and the Action Committee and second, to find out if, and if so how, the presence of the Committee weighed influenced the B T U structures and policy making.⁷ Did fear of a communist "ghost" - hence "La peur du rouge" - make the official union leaders panic?

In May 1940 Belgium became part of the Second World War. With overwhelming dominance German troops walked over the Belgian army whose soldiers were no more than badly trained, poorly equipped youngsters. After eighteen days Belgium surrendered. The Nazis immediately installed a totalitarian regime. The freedom of movement of Belgian political parties and trade unions was restricted.⁸ The Nazi regime wanted to control the whole social field and therefore prohibited each form of free political and union initiative. The existing trade unions were given the choice: they collaborated with the Nazi controlled "Union for manual and intellectual workers" or they stopped their activities. This upset relationships within the organizational structures of the two major Belgian trade unions, the catholic A C V and the socialist B W . The chairman of the socialist "Belgian Workers Party" (BWP), Hendrik De Man, made a strong appeal to the members of the BW to collaborate fully in the new structures of the "Union for manual and intellectual workers." Already a strong believer in a more authoritarian regime, he believed that the breakthrough of the Nazi ideology and its armed forces had put an end to the democratic system. This would now be replaced by a totalitarian regime where the state controlled the social and political field and where free initiative was reduced to almost nothing. The reaction to his appeal was two-fold: a little more than half of the federations within the BW decided to collaborate with the "Union for ... workers" and made the switch.⁹ The other federations, and their members, outlawed themselves and went underground. The degree of activity of these underground cells differed. Some awaited the liberation and made plans for post-war Belgium; others were very active in the resistance against the occupying forces and supported sabotage activities. The Communist Party of Belgium (CPB) undoubtedly was one of the most active groups in the underground movement. Until 1941 the CPB had remained at the sidelines because of the non-

⁷ This article is based on my PhD research on labour relations in the port of Antwerp during the twentieth century ("Een sfeer om haring te braden." Arbeidsverhoudingen in de Antwerpse haven 1919 -72). It was defended in May 2002 at the Department of Contemporary History in Ghent, Belgium. The framework of this thesis consisted of the notes of the "National Joint Committee for the port of Antwerp" which discussed labour conditions and wages since 1919. I was also able to look at primary sources at the city archives of Antwerp, the archives of the Belgian Transport-workers Federation and the archives of the Antwerp Shipping Federation, the Centrale des employeurs du port d'Anvers (Cepa) and the Chamber of Commerce.

⁸ For Belgian labour relations during the Second World War see: D. Martin, A. Collignon (eds.), *1940: België, een maatschappij in crisis en oorlog*, (Brussels, 1993); B.S. Chlepner, *Cent ans d'histoire sociale*, (Liège, 1972).

⁹ W. Steenhaut, *De Unie van Hand- en Geestesarbeiders. Een onderzoek naar het optreden van de vakbonden in de bezettingsjaren (1940-1944)*, unpublished PhD thesis, Ghent, 1983.

aggression treaty between Germany and the USSR.¹⁰ After 1941 however the CPB became one of the most active opponents of the Nazi regime. The CPB, which until then had not been that active on the union level, decided to concentrate on the Belgian industries and factories. With their "Syndical Action Committees" they were very active in several factories where they tried to provoke strikes and work stoppages.¹¹

Their resistance against the Germans made the CPB very popular among the Belgian population and workers immediately after the liberation in 1944. The CPB now became one of the major players in the Belgian political field and its support grew gradually. In 1939 the CPB counted some 10,000 paying members. In 1945 this number had risen to 87,000.¹² Its political and social basis was far broader than before. It had now become "*un acteur central de la vie politique en Belgique*."¹³ The CPB saw this popularity also translated on the political level. At the first post-war elections in February 1946, the CPB gained twenty-three seats in the Belgian parliament. The CPB now took part in the two post-liberation cabinets (1944-47) of Achille Van Acker, the first ever socialist prime minister in Belgium. Together with the Belgian Socialist Party, the CPB formed a very strong left wing in Belgium.

At the level of trade unions this left coalition led to a fusion between communist and socialist trade unions into the "General Belgian Trade-Union" (ABW). Relations between the two wings however can be described as "hostile." Soon after the fusion it became apparent that the political-ideological gap between both wings was too large. There was a lot of distrust from the socialist wing towards the communists who were believed to be unreliable. Both factions differed fundamentally on their main goals and how to achieve them. Communist ideology was still depended on the class struggle and the destruction of capital. Social democrats on the contrary held to a very reformist discourse. Cooperation with the representatives of capital was the way to improve the position and living standard of the labourer. The hostile relations between both wings led to complete paranoia: it was known that the secretary-general of the ABW, Louis had all letters to and from representatives of the communist wing within the union, checked. It was believed that the communists had no other intent than to chase away the socialists.¹⁴ The situation escalated considerably when the first signs of the Cold War became visible and all the communist political parties in Western Europe became associated with the USSR and the "red danger." Like every other communist party in Western Europe the CPB now experienced a quick drop in size. In just five years the

¹⁰ M. Van den Wijngaert, L. Beullens, *Oost West, West Best. België onder de Koude Oorlog 1947-1989*, (Tielt, 1997), 191-201.

¹¹ J. Gotovitch, *Du rouge au tricolore. Résistance et parti communiste. Les communistes belges de 1939 à 1944*, (Brussels, 1992).

¹² J. Gotovitch, "Qu'est-ce que le parti communiste de Belgique. A quoi a-t-il servi? Quelques propositions pour en comprendre l'histoire et la signification," *Brood en rozen. Tijdschrift voor de geschiedenis van sociale bewegingen*, (1997, 4), 21-2.

¹³ *Ibid.* 20.

¹⁴ R. Hemmeryckx, *Het ABW 1940-1949. Van verzet tot Koude Oorlog*, unpublished PhD thesis, Brussels, 2000.

number of paying members fell from 87,000 (1945) to 24,000 (1950). The CPB lost all its attraction and now became an ugly duckling. Representatives of the CPB left the cabinet in February, 1947 after it became clear that Belgium was definitely part of the Western block. In both the political party and the union a radical breach between the communist and the socialist wings came quickly. After he openly questioned the union policy and especially its support for the government, the spokesman for the communist wing, Theo Dejace, and his communist comrades were kicked out of the A B W in early 1947.

The fusion between communists and socialists on the national, inter-sectoral level had also occurred at the local, sectoral level. In the different industrial sectors the communist and socialist unions were merged. The degree of success of this merger differed from sector to sector. In some sectors communists and socialists closely cooperated, in most sectors however relations were not that warm-hearted. In the port of Antwerp, as a consequence of the fusion at the national level, the communists and socialists had shaken hands. It did not take long however before both parties found themselves in conflict. In reality the fusion never stood a chance; the combination of political and ideological differences and a deep personal hostility between the socialist establishment and the communist comrades formed a cocktail just waiting to explode. The seeds of this hostility dated from the end of the 1920s and the 1930s where the BTU fought several rounds with their imaginary communist enemy.

The socialist BTU was formed in 1913 on the ruins of the first socialist dockers' union, "Willen is Kunnen" (WIK).¹⁵ The WIK was founded in 1906 and had in 1907 called a strike to protest against the poor labour conditions in the port of Antwerp. The casual labour system and the fact that the profession of docker was open to everybody lay at the basis of the high unemployment figures among the 15,000 dockers at that time. Only a few thousand were able to make a comfortable living. In trying to improve the labour conditions of the Antwerp dockers, WIK found itself confronted with very powerful employers' federations. The federation of the shipping agents was without doubt the most powerful one. This Fédération Maritime or Antwerp Shipping Federation was founded in 1901 to promote the interests of the Antwerp shipping agents who represented the foreign shipping companies in Antwerp.¹⁶ In 1907 a brutal confrontation erupted between the two major players in the port of Antwerp. WIK called a strike in order to improve labour conditions and to raise wages. The Fédération Maritime refused to enter negotiations and did everything in its power to break the strike including shipping over some hundred English "rats" as strike breakers. Eventually the Fédération Maritime gave in and the strike ended with a wage increase of 10 per cent.

¹⁵ For labour relations in the port of Antwerp see: S. Vanfraechem, *"Een sfeer om haring te braden' Arbeidsverhoudingen in de Antwerpse haven 1919 - 1972,"* unpublished PhD thesis, Ghent, 2002, 532. In English see: S. Vanfraechem, "'For better and for worse.' The long and bumpy road to collective bargaining in the port of Antwerp 1880 - 1940" in A. MacGuinness and S. Murdoch, (eds.), *Maritime Core and Imperial Periphery*, (Tuckwell press, forthcoming) and S. Vanfraechem, "From the Union Générale to the Law Major. Labour relations in the port of Antwerp 1880-1960" *mMomentum*. (Antwerp, 2002), 151-67.

¹⁶ On the Antwerp Shipping Federation see: G. Devos, S. Vanfraechem, *Full Steam Ahead. 100 years of Antwerp Shipping Federation*, (Antwerp, Pandora), 2001.

This heralded a new era. It marked the end of absolute power over the port by the mighty and wealthy employers' Fédération and ushered in the era of collective bargaining. Negotiations began on how the employers' federations and trade unions could meet and discuss labour conditions and wages. The creation of a National Joint Committee (NJC) in 1919 completed these efforts. Representatives of both employers and workers met on a regular basis to discuss different issues concerning working hours, wages, hiring offices, and the casual labour system. For the trade unions this system of collective bargaining also led to a change of view on the relations between labourers and employers. They renounced class struggle and adhered to a more reformist discourse where cooperation with the employers was the central issue. The BTU and its leaders were strong believers in the process of collective bargaining and succeeded in convincing the Antwerp dockers that collective bargaining would do them good. The improvements to the labour conditions and labour organisation helped. Working hours now were regulated, although Antwerp was renown for its "flexibility" in that field, and wages were linked with an the index that guaranteed the stability of the purchasing power of the Antwerp dockers' wages. This success did not harm the trade unions in the Antwerp port. Although the dockers formed a critical mass and on some occasions openly showed their dissatisfaction with the way things were handled in the NJC and the way the unions translated their demands, labour relations after 1919 were quite stable.¹⁷ The socialist BTU and the catholic dockers' union, which only played a very marginal role and represented only 10 to 15 per cent of the Antwerp dockers, were able to control the Antwerp dockers.

There was however a marginal counter-movement that stirred up feelings in trade union circles. It openly questioned the collective bargaining and the way in which the NJC had met the demands of the dockers and had improved their working conditions. The strike of July 1928 and especially the way in which this first counter-movement started, clearly showed the vulnerability of both the process of collective bargaining in Antwerp and the trade unions as part of this process. On 18 June 1928, "three men on a bike" came riding along the Antwerp docks and started shouting at the working dockers.¹⁸ They wanted the dockers to go on strike because the stevedores had refused a wage increase. The three men on a bike were part of a Trotskyist splinter group that was trying to gain a foothold in the Antwerp port. Although this group seemingly represented only a very limited number of dockers - they had no more than ten to fifteen paying members - they succeeded in provoking a strike that was supported by almost every Antwerp docker.¹⁹ The BTU had great difficulty regaining control over the situation on the waterfront. This action had shown that only a very small group of people was able to gain control over the port in a very short period of time. The Trotskyist group was not able to prolong their short-term success. Only half a year later they lacked funds to continue

¹⁷ S. Vanfraechem, "The Antwerp docker between militantism and pragmatism 1900 - 1972, " *International Journal of Maritime History*, (2002, 2) 167-180.

¹⁸ City Archives Antwerp, Modem Archives, 2263/2: Labour conflicts 1924-27, Police reports, Police station 12* district, HB 103, 18 June 1928.

¹⁹ N. DeBeule, *Het Belgisch Trotskisme 1925-1940*, (Ghent, 1980), 152.

the circulation of their magazine *De Afrosser*. Despite this the BTU now fell victim to an extreme form of paranoia. According to them the "red danger" had become the main threat for the port of Antwerp and its work force. Although technically the Trotskyists were no part of the CPB -they had been expelled in the early 1920s - they fully focussed on "the communists." The BTU started a very aggressive campaign in their own magazines (*The Transport-worker*) where the communists were identified with evil. The "agents of Moscow" had no intention of improving working conditions for the Antwerp dockers but on the contrary "had the inherent desire to provoke strikes hoping that the misery of the labourers will be the breeding ground for the communist ideology."²⁰ This statement reflected perfectly the attitude of the BTU towards anything that could be related with communism. This situation deteriorated in the 1930s. The BTU now fell victim to a degree of paranoia that was out of all proportion to the real power or impact communism represented in Belgium. The BTU feared that the difficult economic times and the high unemployment figures would be the ideal breeding ground for the communists.

Days per month worked by registered dockers in Antwerp, 1929 - 1939.²¹

Year	Category I 1-6 days	Category II 7-12 days	Category III 13-18 days	Category IV 19-24 days	Category V >24 days
1929	13%	19%	23 %	27%	15%
1930	12%	19%	26%	29%	14%
1931	19%	22%	24%	23%	12%
1932	25 %	25%	21 %	18%	11 %
1933	20%	22%	24%	23 %	11 %
1934	19%	22%	25 %	23 %	11 %
1935	15 %	20%	25 %	28%	12%

On top of those high unemployment figures came the decreasing wages. As a consequence of the indexing of the wages, wages now followed the trend of the declining prices as shown by the index. The standard wage of the Antwerp docker dropped from 62 Belgian francs in June 1929 to 46 Belgian francs in September 1934.²² The BTU feared that the communists would use the dropping wages and the high unemployment figures as a perfect background to launch a new offensive in the Antwerp port. This led to an extreme form of paranoia where communist spies were seen everywhere. The BTU intensified the campaign in their own magazines. Several columns appeared in *The Dockworker* where the own

²⁰ *The Transport-worker*, July 1928.

²¹ Archives Ceba, Annual reports, Labour statistics 1929-39.

²² Archives Ceba and archives BTU, Notes of NJC 1929-34.

members were reminded of their responsibility. The dockers had best listen to the official union leaders and not to the communists who only wanted to create a feeling of discord among the dockers! "Discipline is the key word. Don't get carried away by some irresponsible elements who only want to stir up trouble. All dockers should be patient. Despite all difficulties and troubles we have experienced we should stay loyal to our unions and if possible make them even stronger. We should in any way acknowledge the leading and discipline of the union."²³

The BTU was however not the only one who feared the "red danger." The port employers too were frightened of a communist tidal wave swamping the Antwerp port. Their fear of potential social unrest caused by the "agents of Moscow" reflected, in the first place, a general feeling among Belgian employers and industrialists. Belgian industrial circles strongly disagreed with what they believed to be a too tolerant attitude of the Belgian government towards the communists. The *Comité Central Industriel* (CCI) the largest employers' federation, dominated by the heavy industries as coal and metal and also renowned for their social conservatism, openly supported and financed anti-communist movements or groups. The most important one was definitely the *Société d'Etudes politiques, économiques et sociales* (SEPES). This organisation distributed monthly bulletins that overestimated the influence and impact of the communist movement and the activities of its militants. By all kinds of manoeuvres they represented the communist movement as some kind of a mysterious sect with one single goal: to overturn the state and install a communist regime. Reports of the National Security Police spoke in the same terms about the communist movements. According to these reports their impact was not yet very great but could well be so in the future.²⁴ In reality the communist movement in Belgium was very marginal in the 1930s. Only during the Borinage miners' strike in June 1932 and the general strike of June 1936 did they have influence. At their peak - that is immediately after the strike of June 1932 - the Communist Party of Belgium (CPB) counted no more than 2,955 paying members. One year later this number had dropped to fewer than 1,500.²⁵

The Antwerp port employers showed a similar feeling of paranoia. The Central Employers' Federation of the Port of Antwerp (Cepa) held several meetings in which the "communist problem" in the Antwerp port was discussed. An internal report dating from May 1935 perfectly reflected the atmosphere in the port and the way the communist movement was represented. In a report that reads just like a spy novel the members of Cepa were warned of the activities of a communist Action Committee in the Antwerp port. According to this report the Action Committee got its directives from the US SR via the Russian embassy in Paris. The

²³ *The Dockworker: Journal for all dockers*, 1932, 5, "To the dockers: discipline above all!"

²⁴ G. Deneckere, "Het rode gevaar tijdens het Interbellum. Of hoe de waan van een wereldwijd communistisch complot de werkelijkheid beïnvloedde," *Brood en rozen. Tijdschrift voor de geschiedenis van sociale bewegingen*, (1997, 4), 49-65.

²⁵ R. Van Doorslaer, "Tussen twee wereldoorlogen," J. Gotovitch, M. Liebman, R. Van Doorslaer, *Een geschiedenis van het Belgisch kommunisme 1921 - 1945*, (Ghent, 1980), 39.

members of the Action Committee also were briefed on board Russian ships in Antwerp. The leader of the Committee was a certain "V. lives in a cabin in the Campine dunes near the Dutch border. V. regularly travels to Moscow to get his directives there."²⁶ Despite such reports it is however absolutely clear that the fear for the "red danger" among both union-leaders and employers was largely overestimated. Although there probably was an Action Committee, research leads to only one conclusion: the impact of this Action Committee in the 1930s was very limited. At no point did it take over control over the Antwerp port or the Antwerp dockers. Indeed at one of the two high points of the CPB in Belgium, namely the general strike of June 1936 - which originated in the Antwerp port - the committee was not even a major player on the field. Although at first it was believed that the strike was provoked by the communists, the BTU had to admit that this strike was a spontaneous movement by the dockers to show their dissatisfaction with the way things were handled in the NJC. At no time did communist cells control the strike. Only at the final general meeting of the BTU at the Antwerp Sportpaleis on 20 June - the only general meeting the BTU held with its members during the 1930s - were some members of a communist Action Committee present in the audience trying to convince the dockers not to accept the conditions to end the strike. These "weirdos" as the socialist newspaper *Volksgazet* called them however did not succeed.²⁷ An overwhelming majority of the dockers accepted the new conditions and went back to work.

The BTU feared the presence of communists in the Antwerp port on an subjective rather than objective analysis of things and for the potential impact communist Action Committees would have on the Antwerp dockers. This had led to an extreme form of paranoia where communist spies were seen everywhere and a complete discrepancy between fact and fiction. As shown above, the impact of the Action Committee on industrial relations in the port of Antwerp was marginal. The Action Committee counted no more than a few dozens active members and was at no time able to control the port. Despite this, the union establishment deeply distrusted the communists and was convinced that communism was the main threat to stable labour relations in the port. In several columns in their monthly bulletins the communists were portrayed as being only interested in the Antwerp dockers for political motives. According to the BTU they had no intention of improving working conditions for the dockers.

This same sense of distrust and hostility characterized the relationship between communists and socialists in the immediate post-war period. Despite all the efforts made, and incentives from the national leaders to do so, the socialist establishment could not or would not cooperate with the communists in the Antwerp port. The merger between the communist transport union and the socialist BTU only existed in theory. In reality the difference of opinion about the internal organisation of the union and the role of the members in setting the union lines enlarged the gap between the two camps from day to day.

²⁶ Archives Antwerp Shipping Federation, Thematic files : strikes in the port nr. 11, Some considerations on communism in the Antwerp port, Report from Ceba to Antwerp Shipping Federation, May 1935.

²⁷ *De Volksgazet*, (1936, 21/06 /1936), "The historical general meeting at the Sportpaleis."

As a result of the fusion between the communist and socialist trade unions into the General Belgian Trade Union (A B W), the local federations were also encouraged to coordinate their efforts and activities and to cooperate closely. In the port of Antwerp the communist camp was concentrated round Frans Van Den Branden. Until 1939 he had been a member of the B T U but immediately after the liberation of the Antwerp port in May 1944 and the restarting of the activities in the port, he founded a "United Front of Transport-workers" (UFT) that was associated with the CPB and its union wing, the United Front.²⁸ As a result of the merger on a national level, the group round Van den Branden merged with the B T U. The UFT had counted 128 paying members.²⁹ The B T U represented 12,000 of the 15,000 dockers in the Antwerp port.³⁰ As a consequence of the fusion the B T U now had a communist nucleus in its own organisation. This communist nucleus would soon turn in to a real Trojan horse for the B T U.

From the beginning relationships between the socialist and communist camp within the B T U were very hostile. The socialist establishment was very suspicious towards the communist camp and did everything in its power to keep Van Den Branden and his comrades down. His independent course and his preference for direct action - a heritage of the activities in the different factories by the communist resistance during the Second World War - was a source of continuing annoyance for the B T U leadership. Both camps differed fundamentally on how to achieve their goals and on the internal organisation of the union. This made it very difficult, if not impossible to bring both parties into a compromise or agreement. The socialist camp - concentrated round Louis Major, Georges Decrom and Pierre Van den Berg - was a strong believer in the process of collective bargaining. They believed that a continuation of the work in the NJC was the best guarantee for success. By sticking to the collective bargaining, the B T U supported the decision of the A B W to follow the government (under the direction of the socialist prime minister Van Acker) in its option for a strict wages and prices policy. After the liberation and the first cautious steps towards restarting the Belgian industrial complex, the Belgian government chose not to let prices and wages fluctuate freely according to the principles of a free market economy, but to regulate the movement of wages and prices. National Labour Conferences (NLC) with government, trade unions and employers' federations fixed the margins within which wages and prizes could fluctuate.³¹ The A B W and the local federations such as the B T U believed that a period of social peace was the ideal and necessary background for such a policy and would lead to a quick and complete recovery of the country's industrial production. In this perspective, strikes and social conflicts could only be seen as the ultimate lifebuoy. Louis Major, who combined his mandate as

²⁸ I. Ollevier, *De laatste communisten. Hun passies, hun idealen.* (Leuven, 1997), 128.

²⁹ R. Hemmeryckx, 175 -176.

³⁰ Archives B T U, B T U Congress, Ostend, Belgium, 1-2 September 1945, 50.

³¹ H. Slomp, T. Van Mierlo, *Arbeidsverhoudingen in België (deel 2)*, (Utrecht, 1984), 21-32; B. S. Chlepner, *Cent ans d'histoire sociale en Belgique*, (Brussels, 1972), 242; D. Luyten, *Sociaal-economisch overleg in België sedert 1918*, (Brussels, 1995), 125.

national secretary of the B T U with the position of national secretary-general of the A B W and was also a member of parliament, defended this option at the general congress of the B T U in September 1945. In a vivid speech he replied to Van Den Branden and his communist comrades and made it clear to them that he, and with him the largest part of the union leaders, did not believe in the communist project. He said: "Comrades, let's be practical. What is revolution? Does this mean that one has to call a strike and afterwards call it off in order not to be blown away? Or is revolution calling a strike when one thinks that this strike can be successful and the demands can be met? Comrades, it is false to believe that - as Van Den Branden has claimed - that one can change the course of history. It has never happened that one could change the course of history. It has never happened in the past and it will never happen in the future that a revolution will take us from one world to another, from a capitalist to a socialist society. And it will definitely not occur by proclaiming some theories out of old books."³² Louis Major concluded by stating that by calling a strike "we would return in to time and possibly be blown away forever." As another consequence of their support of government policy, the B T U chose not to claim any extra-conventional wage increases. They accepted that the government, and the government only, defined the limits of wage evolution. The communist Action Committee on its side, despite the fact that the CPB was also part of the Belgian government, was not willing to lay that much power in the hands of the government. They believed that direct action remained a very effective weapon to enforce their aims and were not willing to give this up. They did not hesitate to use the strike weapon. In May 1946 they called a wildcat strike not only against the will of the B T U but also against the will of the CPB and the communist ministers in the Belgian government. With this strike Van Den Branden wanted to show the solidarity of the Antwerp dockers with the Rotterdam dockers and seamen who since 26 April had been protesting the lowering of their wages.³³ The B T U clearly disagreed with this strike and particularly with its timing. It came in the middle of intense negotiations with the employers to introduce a system of attendance money. In their own bulletins Van den Branden and his group were now described as "troublemakers, hooligans and instigators."³⁴ This strike also put the communist ministers in the Belgian government in an awkward position. CPB minister Lalmand even summoned Van Den Branden to his office and asked him to end the strike.³⁵ Only after a few days did Van Den Branden agree and call the strike off. The fact that he called a strike and thereby passed over the B T U leaders and that even the CPB mandataries were unable to control Van Den Branden, was interpreted by the B T U establishment as yet another proof of the unreliability of Van Den Branden and his gang.

³² Archives Amsab - Institute for social history, Ghent, Belgium, Fonds Louis Major 1, volume 664, Notes, B T U Congress 1-2 September 1945.

³³ E. Nijhof, *"Gezien de dreigende onrust in de haven. " De ontwikkeling van de arbeidsverhoudingen in de Rotterdamse haven 1945-1965,* (Amsterdam, 1988), 223-239, B. Reinalda, "De Rotterdamse haven- en zeeliedenstakingen in 1945 en 1946," *TeElfder Ure,* (1973, 20), 853-908.

³⁴ Archives B T U, NJC Antwerp, Sessions of 11, 13, 15, 17 and 23 May 1946.

³⁵ I. Ollevier, 129.

The internal organisation of the union was another matter that led to hard negotiations. Van Den Branden and his group openly spoke about a gap between union leaders and dockers/members. The chairman and his secretaries especially were heavily criticized. The fact that they were paid employees of the union and no longer on active service at the docks led, according to Van Den Branden, to the conditions that they no longer knew what was happening on the waterfront. They were blamed for being too independent and not consulting the members. The Action Committee wanted to "democratise the organisation. This mean[t] the full participation of the members, elections for the different union-levels and a general assembly of all members."³⁶ The general assembly would become a point of contention between the socialist and communist camp within the organisation. Van den Branden's Action Committee a general meeting to be organised on a monthly basis to give the members the opportunity or chance to question the union's policy and its elected leaders. The B T U establishment, however, had a very dubious view of general assemblies. In the 1930s when the union agreed with several wage cuts, general meetings were never held: the members did not have any opportunity to agree or disagree with this option. In the 1940s the B T U stuck to this tradition: general meetings were definitely not a priority for the union leaders. Any request to hold such a meeting, whether from communist or socialist members, was always turned down. According to the union leaders there was "a total lack of interest for such meetings with the members."³⁷ This apparent lack of interest, however, was probably not the main reason why the B T U opposed such general meetings. Their decision not to hold them was more than likely the result of tactical concerns: Louis Major and especially his right-hand man Geoges Decrom feared that a general meeting could turn into a massive protest against the union leaders and their policy. A new demand for a general meeting in September 1947, was blocked by Louis Major himself as follows: "Van Den Branden has his own opinion about a general meeting. According to him a general meeting consists of calling together all members to overthrow the executive committee. According to him this is democracy. Well then comrades, it does not go that way. It has never happened like that and it will never happen like this. We are a well-structured organisation. We are not a bunch of anarchists coming together to plan all sorts of tactical manoeuvres to overthrow the leaders."³⁸ Major openly referred to the only general meeting the union had with its members in the 1930s during the June 1936 strike. On 20 June the B T U had assembled its 10,000 members in the large indoor Sportpaleis. The first hour of this meeting was dominated by a verbal fight between members of a communist Action Committee and the B T U leaders. In an enormous chaos - the public address system had broken down which delayed the beginning of the meeting - a few dockers sympathizing with the Action Committee wandered around in the large hall trying to

³⁶ City Archives Antwerp, Modern Archives, 12564: Labour conflicts, Strike of the Antwerp dockers August-September 1946, "Comrades, dockers," Action Committee pamphlet, by Frans Van Den Branden, s.d.

³⁷ Archives Amsab, Fonds Louis Major 1, volume 664, Notes, B T U Congress, 1-2 September 1945.

³⁸ Archives B T U, B T U Congress, B T U, Ghent, Belgium, 30 August-1 September 1947, 78.

convince their comrades not to accept the conditions to end the strike.³⁹ Although we have seen that they were not successful, the B T U apparently drew the conclusion that a general meeting open to all members was too risky. Since that general meeting on 20 June 1936, the B T U had never again held one. This issue of the general meeting turned into a circular argument: the fact that the union leaders were not keen on organising one convinced the Action Committee that the leaders were too independent and did not want to share power with the members. On the other hand, the determined way in which Van Den Branden kept on asking for a general meeting convinced the socialist establishment that the communists had tactical reasons for wanting one.

The hostility between both camps also led to all kinds of tactical manoeuvres by the socialist establishment in order to keep Van Den Branden and his disciples down. A first step was to ensure that they did not have representation in any of the unions organizations. According to the union statutes the members of the different commissions within the union had to be elected by a general meeting. Between 1945 and 1949 however those councils were elected by a special procedure which gave the members the opportunity to vote by post.⁴⁰ It is most likely that the B T U leadership chose this procedure because they feared that the communists would infiltrate a general meeting and succeed in electing their candidates. This is another example of the B T U fear of the mobilisation power of the communists.

The introduction of the "attendance money" was undoubtedly the finest example of a tactical manoeuvre by the B T U to make the Action Committee ineffective. In Antwerp the 15,000 dockers were still hired on a casual, day-to-day basis. In 1946 the combination of a contingent that was far too large and the decrease of tasks, led to unemployment figures (daily average) between 3,000 and 5,500.⁴¹ The B T U assumed that a high unemployment rate, the financial consequences this unemployment had in a system of mainly casual labour and the presence of a large number of unemployed labourers wandering around in the docks were the ideal background for possible agitation by the Action Committee. During several meetings of the NJC in 1945 and 1946 they repeatedly stated that they feared the potential that this large group of unemployed dockers would easily follow the Action Committee of Van Den Branden.⁴² Therefore the B T U proposed to introduce "attendance money," giving the docker a financial security to fall back on when he was not hired, combined with a reduction of the number of registered dockers to a more reasonable total. They suggested that greater financial stability would keep the dockers away from the communist temptation. It is evident from the notes of the NJC sessions and the informal notes of B T U meetings that attendance money was seen as a way of preventing a full-scale breakthrough of communists in the port.

Events on the Antwerp waterfront however proved this assumption wrong. The

³⁹ *De Volksgazet*, (1936,21/06/1936), "The historical general meeting at the Sportpaleis."

⁴⁰ Archives B T U, B T U Congress, Ghent, Belgium on 30 August-1 September 1947, B T U Congress, Liege, Belgium 7-10 July 1949.

⁴¹ *Arbeidsblad* (official bulletin, Belgian ministry of Labour), February 1946, 156.

⁴² Archives B T U, NJC Antwerp, Sessions, 19 and 22 April 1945.

introduction of the attendance money does not seem to have weakened the position of the Action Committee, which on several occasions succeeded in making an appeal to the Antwerp dockers. In December 1946, only two months after the introduction of attendance money, a wildcat strike broke out in the port. Although this strike was not called by Van Den Branden and his gang, they fully supported it. This self-willed behaviour of the communist wing made the relationship with the socialist wing more hostile. In July 1947 the situation reached a climax. In March of that year the communists had pulled out of the Belgian government which cooled the relationship between communists and socialists. The CPB now began a full scale opposition against the wages and prices policy of the government. They opted for direct industrial action as a way of showing their disapproval. The Antwerp docks were chosen as one of the leading sectors on which they would focus.⁴³ The CPB aimed to gain a firm foothold in the port. From May 1947 onwards Van Den Branden's Action Committee closely collaborated with the CPB and focussed its attention on the failing wages and prices policy which had reduced the purchasing power of the average docker. During a wildcat strike in July 1947 the Action Committee asked for extra-conventional wage increases and a general meeting of the members. A crowd of some thousands of Antwerp dockers marched through the streets of Antwerp to support these demands. The B T U now found itself openly confronted by an apparent counter-movement that was openly questioning union policy.⁴⁴ Both demands were rejected by the B T U which worked closely with the port employers during the strike and sought for measures to break it. The B T U even encouraged the employers to hire non-registered dockworkers, a practice to which they had always previously objected. Louis Major also took advantage of his political contacts - he had become a member of parliament since the 1946 elections - and convinced the socialist minister of Labour, Delattre, to make the threat to send military personnel to the port to break the strike.⁴⁵ Eventually the strike came to an end without a wage increase. This strike ushered in the swan song of the Action Committee and Van Den Branden. They were expelled from the B T U in December 1947.⁴⁶

The exclusion of Van Den Branden and his henchmen in 1947 was however not the end of the activities of the communist Action Committee in Antwerp. The docks remained the favourite playground of Van Den Branden where he remained a forceful presence. The central hiring hall now became his main action territory. On a regular basis Van Den Branden would install himself at the entrance of the hall, distributing pamphlets in which he criticized the B T U policy and called for general meetings. According to police reports his demands appealed to some dockers: groups of dockers gathered around the members of the Action Committee

⁴³ R. Hemmeryckx, 381.

⁴⁴ Archives BTU, NJC Antwerp, Session, 24 July 1947; *De Volksgazet*, (1947, 29707/19'47), "Geen werkhervatting aan de haven."

⁴⁵ In his monthly report to the US State Department in Washington, an employee of the US embassy in Brussels, reported on a meeting he had with Louis Major during which Major defended this measure. "He admits that under ordinary circumstances his proposal could be condemned as 'fascistic' in nature, but stresses that it was the only expedient that could resolve the situation." R. Hemmeryckx, 254.

⁴⁶ Archives BTU, BTU Congress, Liege, 7-10 July 1949.

who were trying to convince their comrades that their claim for extra wage increases and more internal democracy in the union was a just cause.⁴⁷ This continuing presence of members of the former Action Committee kept the BTU leadership very alert. Their main goal in the following years clearly was to prevent at all cost the outbreak of a new series of wildcat strikes. Such strikes would further weaken their position in the NJC and would make the employers' representatives question the representativeness of the formal trade unions in the Antwerp port. On top of that, a wildcat strike and the questions and insecurity - how long? costs? - that it would raise, might make large shipping companies reluctant to use Antwerp thus weakening the port's competitiveness. Although this issue already had an impact on labour relations and labour organisation during the interwar years, it became more important after the Second World War. Rotterdam, which had been completely destroyed by the Germans in 1944, had fully recovered and was rapidly overtaking Antwerp. In 1949 Rotterdam took over from Antwerp the first spot in the European classification of maritime traffic.⁴⁸ The competition between Antwerp and Rotterdam, and other northern European ports, was not only a consideration in the areas of cargo volume, port infrastructure, and maritime accessibility, but also with regard to labour cost. The Antwerp port that had always been renown for its cheap labour, now found itself in a tight corner. While the central wages policy was very successful in the Netherlands, a similar policy completely failed in Belgium with all the possible consequences for the various Belgian industrial sectors and their labour cost. Belgium now suffered from a labour cost that was considerably higher than in the Netherlands. The port of Antwerp reflected this; the standard wage in Antwerp was 50 per cent higher than in Rotterdam. The Antwerp port employers made a strong appeal to the unions to temper labour costs and the demands of the dockers. It seems as if the reaction of the BTU to this demand was (at least to some extent) determined by the Action Committee. The BTU was reluctant to give in completely to this demand for wage restraint and on the contrary pleaded for extra-conventional wage increases. It is most likely that the BTU demanded such wage increases under pressure of the events on the waterfront. Van Den Branden kept on distributing pamphlets in which he criticised the union policy and demanded wage increases. In May 1948 the BTU demanded a wage increase of 5 per cent retroactive to March. In his justification for this demand the BTU representative in the NJC, stated that he had been able to keep everything calm on the docks, but feared that "he would be overrun" if the wage increase was not accepted by the employers.⁴⁹ The eventual decision to accept a wage increase was undoubtedly the result of "potential threats from irresponsible elements."⁵⁰ This fear influenced the policy and direction of the BTU. To give just one other example the BTU refused to expand the registered work force because they feared that this eventually

⁴⁷ City Archives Antwerp, Modern Archives, 14353: Activities at the Antwerp docks, police-reports 1946-61, November and December weekly reports, 1947.

⁴⁸ E. Nijhof, 405.

⁴⁹ Archives BTU, NJC Antwerp, Session 18 March 1948.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, Session 20 May 1948.

would lead to more unemployment and more "irresponsible elements who could stir things up."⁵¹

Nothing really changed with respect to Van den Branden's other major criticism, the lack of internal democracy of the union. Although in the 1950s some general meetings were held, the BTU's strange relationship with them persisted. In internal documents there are several appeals by members of the union to hold such meetings. Most of the demands however were rejected by the chairman and secretary of the union, stating that mass meetings would be used by the communists to start a stir in the docks, thus damaging the union's negotiating position with the port employers. This fear - "la peur du rouge" - amongst the BTU-union leaders for the communists would continue to live on in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the Communist Party of Belgium being reduced to some thousand members nation-wide. Although the Action Committee was in the 1950s and 1960s reduced to a two members, Frans van den Branden and his brother, the BTU was very eager to minimise the risk of communists getting in their way. Every demand for a general meeting was blocked in an impertinent way. Every demand for such meeting was also interpreted as suspicious and coming from the communist wing. Louis Philips, a former member of the CPB, was told: "We have enough contact with our members. By the way, we shouldn't be lectured on what democracy should be by someone who represents an ideology in which free trade unions have no place."⁵² As a security measure the executive board of the union decided in 1968 that they themselves could decide whether they called a general meeting or not.⁵³ In practice no such meeting was called in the 1960s!

The tension between fact and fiction throughout the period under review clearly shows how a subjective perception can steer an organisation into a certain direction. The fact is that communist Action Committees were present in the Antwerp port since the late 1920s. The BTU's perception of this movement in the 1930s was, however, mainly fiction. In the minds of the official union executive the communist danger grew to the size of a twelve-headed monster that was absolutely uncontrollable. The BTU fell victim to an extreme form of paranoia where communism was everywhere, but in reality it was probably an imaginary enemy that counted no more than a few dozen active members. The determined way in which the BTU fought communism bore no relation to the real power of Action Committees. The BTU fought several rounds with an invisible shadow. This form of paranoia and the hostility towards communism in the 1930s, (a trend that was seen in other Belgian industrial sectors), or anything that even remotely smelled like communism, defined relationships between the communist and socialist wing at the left side in the immediate post-war period. That was definitely the case in the port of Antwerp. The deep personal aversion to communism meant that the merger between the communist Transport Union of Van Den Branden and the BTU of Louis Major and Georges Decrom never stood a chance. Political-ideological differences translated into differences in opinion on the internal organisation of the union but personal

⁵¹ *Ibid*, Session 15 January 1948.

⁵² Archives BTU, BTU Congress, 5 June 1966.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 4-5 May 1968.

dislike between individuals intensified the gap between communists and socialists in the port in daily relations. In successive tactical rounds, the socialist wing fought what they believed to be the Action Committee's attempts to get rid of the structural basis of success. The introduction of the attendance money is the most important examples of this tactical game by the B T U to counter the communist Action Committee: the B T U thought that securing a financial basis for the dockers would make them less susceptible to the "red danger." Events at the waterfront however proved this assumption wrong. It was this mobilizing power of Van Den Branden and his gang that would for years on make the B T U very alert for the communist danger. Even when the Action Committee literally consisted of no more than two men and a dog, the B T U still feared their potential attraction to the dockers. Fact and fiction remained miles apart.