

REACTIONS OF THE LIBERAL AND NEUTRAL PRESS OF GHENT TO THE EVENTS OF MARCH

1886

Mark A. VANDERHEYDEN

Three days after the initial outbursts of popular anger in Liège, at the time when the paper still believes that it is only „une indisposition légère du corps social”, the *Flandre Libérale* already has some ideas about the necessary remedies for the social ills. „According to us, there must be a general reduction of work-hours.”¹

Shortly afterwards, however, the *Flandre* no longer gives priority to the actual welfare of the suffering working classes, but returns to one of her own pet political projects. The sole solution possible for the present disastrous situation is the „education” of the workers². One should not be blinded by the apparent generosity of the Liberal paper, nor by her modern approach to the social problem, nor by her misleading altruism. Indeed, considered in the context of the entire editorial, it becomes obvious that the Ghent Liberal mouthpiece is concentrating on the remedy of „education, as a means, of attacking the clerical party. The issue of education is a constant polemical subject between the Catholic and Liberal press, a carry-over from the heated „school dispute” of the previous administration and a living, though very painful, memory for the Liberals who lost the leadership in Parliament because of it³. The Liberals’ intentions are rather irrelevant when compared to the intrinsic truth and value of their proposal.

The journal is emphatic in assaying the proposals of the more leftist-inclined press. When the radical *La Reforme* of Brussels advocates electoral reforms as the best resolution for the turmoil, the *Flandre Libérale* is angered because of her own vehement opposition to any move toward universal suffrage. „The unfortunate people who are demonstrating their political talents by burning the Hainaut province have to be kept far away from the voting booths.”⁴ Another resolution of *La Reforme*, namely the expropriation of the coal mines, draws severe and sarcastic comment from the paper: „Sans doute pour mettre les émeutiers en appétit!”⁵

The sequence of propositions made by the Liberal paper turns more and more to the political debate with the government and the clerical

(1) *Flandre*, March 21, p. 1, c. 2.

(2) *Ibid.*, March 25, p. 1, c. 4.

(3) One cannot help but doubt and question the honesty of the Liberal paper in proposing this solution, since one is constantly confronted with the use of „education projects” as polemical tools in the political warfare between Liberals and Catholics.

(4) *Flandre*, March 29, p. 1, c. 4.

(5) *Ibid.*

party and when concrete suggestions are made in its editorial columns, the authors are very anxious to point out that they have urged these measures for considerable time and that it is the incompetence of the present government which has prevented the realization of these suggestions. „We have proposed measures to regulate the work of women and children and also legislation to democratize the army...”⁶ If this legislation has not been implemented, only the clerical party can be blamed since it is the party of those „who insist on delaying the progress of freedom and equality in the nation.”⁷

When, in early April, the parliamentary debate centers around „the disastrous effects of the Law of 1884 which „virtually put an end to the system of public education by order of the clerical cabinet”, *Flandre* reiterates its lament that the real social disease is the combination of weakness, ignorance and lack of foresight among the workers. Thus it concludes, that the only remedy is education and not the kind that is offered in the *Catechisme du Peuple* or the *Catechisme de Malines*⁸.

More specifically, the *Flandre* wants the re-introduction of the adult education schools, which have been out of operation since the Catholics come into power⁹. The entire debate around „school law”, public instruction and the like, gives the *Flandre* many opportunities to express her vehemement and dogmatic anticlericalism.

Compulsory education and regulation of child labor have priority on the lists of Liberal remedies for the social situation and are frequently expressed in the editorial columns¹⁰; any special occasion will do, for example, the time when the „cabinet of ignorance” abolishes four teacher colleges¹¹, or the selection of M. Buls as mayor of Brussels¹².

In general, *Flandre* takes a rather negative approach in regard to remedies for the social problems. The paper finds it necessary to fight any proposal coming from the non-Liberal camp. One is tempted to conclude that the *Flandre* is negative even when the paper denies such an accusation¹³. Most of its energy is given to an all-out attack against the suggestion that universal suffrage might be the most adequate corrective to the troubled social conditions in the country¹⁴.

The *Flandre* is extremely skeptical of the value and meaning of the *Commission du Travail*, which is attempting a thorough investigation of

(6) *Ibid.*, March 31, p. 1, c. 4. Repeated: April 1, p. 1, c. 3; June 15 & 16, p. 2, c. 4.

(7) *Ibid.*, March 31, p. 1, c. 4.

(8) *Ibid.*, April 3, p. 1, c. 3.

(9) *Flandre*, April 7, p. 1, c. 2.

(10) *Ibid.*, April 7, p. 1, c. 3; April 12, p. 1, c. 2; April 18, p. 1, c. 2; July 11, p. 1, c. 2, 3.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 2, c. 1. The paper announces that the government is planning to close four „écoles normales”, in Andenne, Verviers, Louvain and Hoboken.

(12) *Flandre*, May 20, p. 1, c. 2.

(13) *Ibid.*, June 18, p. 1, c. 3; „Ensuite notre politique n'est que négative qu'en apparence. Nous combattons le cléricalisme.”

(14) The *Flandre's* attitude towards the problem of universal suffrage as a social measure and a political goal will be mentioned later.

the social conditions among the workers. This skepticism is certainly inspired by an „opposition mentality” against anything that is instituted by the „incompetent clerical cabinet”, and also by the Liberal axioms that such commissions are useless until full attention is paid to the education of the workers, the „only” remedy for the social disease¹⁵. The success of the Socialist cooperatives, like the bakeries and pharmacies of the *Vooruit*, is due to the „educated leadership” not to the cooperatives themselves¹⁶. The knowledge of people like E. Anseele has given this experiment a qualified success which proves once more to the *Flandre* that the instruction of the workers is the sole measure that is necessary. This seems to be the only real corrective the paper is capable of bringing forward throughout the entire year following the March events. After proposing, initially, the reduction of work hours, which are soon to be achieved for women and children, the *Flandre* returns to the project of public instruction. In the case of this latter proposition, the polemical overtone obscures the honesty and sincerity of the suggestion. Summing up, one can only state that the Liberal paper is acutely aware of the situation in the country but fails to offer any imaginative proposals. Political bigotry has blinded the Liberal eyes and minds on the social problems of the lower classes.

The *Journal de Gand*, suffering from the same Liberal prejudices as the *Flandre*, does not succeed in presenting constructive suggestions for amelioration of the social situation. Frightened by the specter of eventual changes in the electoral system, the paper immediately attacks any such proposition as universal suffrage¹⁷. On the other hand, the *Journal* is anxious to see changes in the military service law since the army presents an eventual danger for the civil peace, which is demonstrated by the attitude of the army during the suppression of the violent strikes¹⁸. While expressing sympathy for reform and hope that this reform in turn may improve the social atmosphere, the paper does not say how it is to be executed. Whereas the paper rarely shows any form of creative thinking in social affairs, the *Journal* is constantly ready to judge and criticize any proposition from the non-Liberal side. When the Catholic *L'Impartial* ventures some ideas, the Liberal paper calls them „impossible and utopian” and suggests that „one would do better to abolish all the properties of religious communities and to distribute them among the impoverished.”¹⁹

The anticlericalism is most obvious when the paper examines the resolutions of the Congress de Liège and insinuates that the Catholic party is only concerned with reaffirming her dominance over the lower classes²⁰.

(15) *Flandre*, June 24, p. 1, c. 2.

(16) *Ibid.*, June 27, p. 1, c. 2; July 1, p. 1, c. 2; October 30, p. 1, c. 3.

(17) *Journal*, March 31, p. 1, c. 3; June 23, p. 1, c. 3; July 31, p. 2, c. 1; Aug. 16, p. 2, c. 4.

(18) *Ibid.*, April 9, p. 1, c. 4; April 10, 22, etc. The military question is the favorite topic of the editorials of the *Journal* and this issue makes the front page throughout the year.

(19) *Journal*, June 14, p. 2, c. 3.

(20) *Ibid.*, Sept. 27, p. 2, c. 1; Sept. 28, p. 1, c. 5; p. 2, c. 1.

The *Journal* has some reserved praise for the *Commission du Travail* but does not approve the majority of the findings and certainly not its suggestions for crash programs for better workers' housing²¹.

Generally speaking, the Flemish counterpart of *Flandre Libérale* and *Journal de Gand* is not very fruitful in its search for remedies for the troubles. The *Morgenblad* is even more inclusive in its condemnation of all that is not Liberal in origin or execution. More than any other paper, *Morgenblad* insists upon immediate and strong action to suppress the strikers and to restore law and order in the country with all means at the disposal of the government. This is its first step to remedy the situation²².

When the *Frankfurter Zeitung* discusses the political consequences of the Belgian crisis, it recommends the introduction of universal suffrage on the ground that this would give the workers the opportunity to bring their grievances into Parliament, rather than into the streets. The *Morgenblad's* sharp editorial reaction against the German commentator reveals its distaste for universal suffrage and its faith in the classical Liberal formula for solving the social crisis: public instruction for the impoverished working classes²³. This education must be government supported and controlled because any other form, like the Catholic school system, makes the children more subject to the Pope than to the nation, and hence defeats its educational purpose²⁴. This is the only positive suggestion the Liberal paper has and it is generally expressed in a polemical context, mostly against *Bien Public*. *Morgenblad* examines rather arrogantly the proposed correctives from other sources — government, Catholic and Socialist — whether made in the press or by individuals. The suggestion for universal suffrage is the most bitterly attacked of all²⁵.

The brilliant analyses by the correspondent of the Dutch paper, *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* on the crisis in Belgium was used by the *Morgenblad* in its entirety since the article corresponded with the Liberal paper's own views on the causes of the conflicts. But when *Morgenblad* must propose basic solutions, it is not very inspiring and its comment resembles the platitudes of many clerical papers.

The situation thus is serious, even after the rioting has completely passed. The workers need to be warned against the disastrous instigations of the anarchists. Provisions must be made for their needs of body and soul. This will be the task of every administration which considers the immediate as well as long-range needs; an administration is not only ready to punish crimes but willing to prevent disasters in the social order²⁶.

The *Morgenblad* regularly lectures the working classes in a paternalistic fashion on the disastrous consequences of their unintelligent actions and

(21) *Ibid.*, August 1, p. 2, c. 1.

(22) *Morgenblad*, March 25, p. 1, c. 2.

(23) *Ibid.*, March 27, p. 1, c. 3; July 25, p. 1, c. 3, 4; Aug. 20, p. 1, c. 3.

(24) *Ibid.*, March 28, p. 1, c. 2; April 8, p. 3, c. 2; April 11, p. 2, c. 1.

(25) *Ibid.*, March 27, p. 1, c. 2, 3; March 30, p. 1, c. 1; June 5, p. 2, c. 1; June 19, p. 1, c. 2, 3; July 4, p. 2, c. 1; Aug. 17, p. 1, c. 2; Aug. 18, p. 1, c. 1; Aug. 20, p. 1, c. 4.

(26) *Ibid.*, April 2, p. 2, c. 2.

brutal strikes. The paper insists that the workers are being used by a group of „malicious people” and that the workers need to be told, constantly, that they are hurting themselves when they follow anarchist incentives. To point out the dangers is the best preventive medication, the paper believes²⁷. However, the most immediate need is the re-establishment of law and order by the organization of the „garde civile” in rural districts²⁸.

When the conflict is abating in the area of Charleroi, the editorial of *Morgenblad* describes the country's situation as peaceful but immediately adds an urgent plea to the government to initiate remedies without indicating any in particular as to which or what²⁹. The same vagueness can be found a few weeks later when the correspondent in Charleroi reports to the paper: „The strikes are temporarily finished... One can certainly expect, that the strike will be resumed in June, and perhaps sooner, if justice is not to be done to the workers.”³⁰

When the *Commission du Travail* finally submitted a list of recommendations, the *Morgenblad* retorts bitterly that the document is written solely in French and expresses bewilderment since the crisis afflicts not only the Walloon provinces but the Flemish as well. „Or,” the paper asked, „are the Flemings perhaps unworthy to be included in a national survey, according to M. Beernaert?”³¹

The fact that the Commission injured the „Flemish feeling” of the paper is not the only reason why the *Morgenblad* is rather skeptical about the proposals. The abolition of women and child labor, the regulation of working hours and increase of wages may be very appealing to the human heart, and very reasonable, the paper comments, but they are misleading from an economic point of view. Indeed, it may hurt the economy and aggravate the crisis even further since all those measures would make competition on the European market even harder for Belgian industry³². Expressing the fear that the Commission will not succeed in presenting workable reforms to enhance the standard of living of the working classes, the paper does accept two of the proposals: security funds for retired and crippled workers, and compulsory life insurance for the workers. The paper endorses these proposals fully and suggests a rapid implementation under the supervision of the government along the lines of the German system³³. If this could be realized, the activities of the Commission would be amply rewarded³⁴. Beyond support for these proposals, *Morgenblad* remains indecisive on social issues. Certainly it has no firm and distinct program to correct the poverty of the working classes.

(27) *Ibid.*, April 3, p. 1, c. 3 ; June 25, p. 2, c. 1 ; July 8, p. 1, c. 3, 4 ; July 17, p. 1, c. 2, 3.

(28) *Ibid.*, April 6, p. 1, c. 3.

(29) *Ibid.*, April 8, p. 1, c. 1, 2.

(30) *Ibid.*, April 24, p. 3, c. 1.

(31) *Ibid.*, June 18, p. 2, c. 1.

(32) *Ibid.*, Aug. 3, p. 1, c. 1, 2 ; Aug. 7, p. 1, 2, 3 ; Aug. 21, p. 1, c. 3, 4 ; Aug. 27, p. 2, c. 1.

(33) *Ibid.*, Aug. 7, p. 1, c. 2, 3 ; Aug. 20, p. 1, c. 1 ; Oct. 18, p. 1, c. 2, 3 ; Nov. 4, p. 2, c. 1.

(34) *Ibid.*, Aug. 7, p. 1, c. 3.

The Liberal weekly, *Het Volksbelang*, follows very much the line of reasoning of *Morgenblad* with to most political, cultural, and social issues. After the situation calmed down substantially, the weekly recommends „good and free education” for the worker population as the best possible remedy³⁵. Even though the suggestion may have some polemical overtones, the weekly is certainly sincere in its demand for aid to education. Besides education, it is necessary to form more cooperatives which definitely improve the social conditions of the workers as *Volksbelang* admits has been proved by *Vooruit*³⁶.

Volksbelang shares the skepticism of the *Morgenblad* with respect to the efficacy of the proposals of the Commission even though the good intention of the committee members is not doubted³⁷. However, the paper believes that, since the Socialist workers are too demanding, good will is doomed to fail. The Socialist demands for the expropriation of capital and for universal manhood suffrage are utopian and even disastrous for the welfare of the workers. It is only a disguise for the self-interest and ambitions of the Socialist leaders³⁸. The issue of expropriation, which was debated at length during the Socialist congress in Brussels, disturbs the *Volksbelang*. The editor points to the faulty analogy made by the Socialists when they plead their case with references to the expropriations of capital and properties of nobility and clergy during the French Revolution when nationalization and confiscation had been common practices. *Volksbelang* claims that in the French case the goods were only confiscated if the proprietors had fled the country and that they were restored after their return³⁹.

When the industrialist De Naeyer of Willebroeck introduces a proposal in which is outlined an entire process by which workers in his factories will, ultimately, become owners of their company-built houses through an annual interest procedure, *Volksbelang* calls the entire plan to optimistic. Arguments are advanced against the suggestion and the weekly expresses the hope that improvement in housing will come in other ways⁴⁰.

One wonders sometimes about the truthfulness of the weekly's desire to bring about serious amelioration of social conditions. The remedies proposed are very modest and never have the scope which one could expect in a year of crisis. The humanitarian attitude towards poverty-stricken working classes is still surpassed by bourgeois prejudice for the property owners.

(35) *Volksbelang*, April 10, p. 1, c. 3. „Free education”, completely paid and provided for by the government is the most important „Socialistic” measure, the weekly claims. „Too bad that the clerical government is destroying public instruction completely!” is the final comment.

(36) *Volksbelang*, April 17, p. 1, c. 4. The author notes that a cooperative is really contrary to Socialistic philosophy because it is an expression of the power of individuals whereas Socialism believes in the supremacy of the government.

(37) *Ibid.*, June 19, p. 1, c. 1; Aug. 7, p. 1, c. 2.

(38) *Ibid.*, June 18, p. 1, c. 2, 3, 4; July 10, p. 1, c. 1, 2; Aug. 7, p. 1, c. 3; Nov. 27, p. 1, c. 1, 2, 3.

(39) *Ibid.*, Juni 26, p. 1, c. 1, 2, 3.

(40) *Ibid.*, Oct. 30, p. 1, c. 1, 2, 3, 4.

What remains is a paternalistic mentality with regard to the workers' dreams and wishes ⁴¹.

The independent or neutral press in Ghent, *Gazette van Gent* and *Volksblad*, by its very nature abstains from any debate on social issues. There is hardly ever an editorial or an article, never a comment on a particular event, person or issue. Throughout 1886, there are only two exceptions in *Volksblad* with regard to the social problem. When in Geraardsbergen (East Flanders), the workers of the phosphorous factory go on strike, demanding a weekly wage without any deduction, the *Volksblad* comments in parentheses (literally): „This appears to us to be reasonable.” ⁴². Again in September, the paper cannot resist a comment on a strike in Ghent's textile industry that „the strike in Smet-Guequier factory and the consequent commotion are the work of the Socialist *Vooruit*...” ⁴³.

The *Gazette* follows the same pattern with perhaps the exception that the paper will include articles on labor topics once in a while. The American Knights of Labor and their leader, T.V. Powderly, is the subject of one ⁴⁴. Other articles are on Leopold von Ranke ⁴⁵, the Pope, when a papal letter on the social problem is rumored ⁴⁶, and several others.

The only comment the *Gazette* has concerning the organization of a *Commission du Travail* by the government is the papers' discontent with an exclusively French list of questions. When will the Flemish be considered? is its question ⁴⁷! With respect to the proceedings of this same committee, the *Gazette* voices strong disapproval that the hearings held in Ghent were kept secret and that the press was not allowed to sit in. When the Brussels newspaper *La Gazette* was privileged to attend such hearings, the Ghent paper's complaint turns into dissatisfaction ⁴⁸.

When the *Commission du Travail* investigates the workers' social condition in Zele, the *Gazette* publishes an article, in the form of a letter, in which the entire procedure is criticized. „Not a single workman dares to appear before the commission because of his fear of losing his job. The situation is terrible: there are many unemployed and the fortunate ones who have found jobs receive only half or their precious wage and it is paid to them in goods. There is no opportunity for protest and the entire workers' community of Zele is as silent as a graveyard. None speaks because he knows that starvation will be the result. This game is painful and we speak out against it! Help for Zele... before it is too late...!” ⁴⁹.

This peculiar letter of accusation and the emotional appeal for immediate action and help are quite remarkable for the normally stoic *Gazette*

(41) *Ibid.*, Nov. 27, p. 1, c. 1, 2, 3.

(42) *Volksblad*, April 24, p. 2, c. 3. The same incident is reported by the *Gazette*, without any comment however.

(43) *Volksblad*, Sept. 29, p. 2, c. 3.

(44) *Gazette van Gent*, May 18, p. 2, c. 1.

(45) *Ibid.*, May 26, p. 2, c. 1, 2.

(46) *Ibid.*, June 9, p. 2, c. 1.

(47) *Ibid.*, June 19, p. 2, c. 4.

(48) *Ibid.*, July 29, p. 2, c. 3.

(49) *Ibid.*, Aug. 29, p. 2, c. 3: *Te Zele*.

and could not remain unnoticed. Several manufacturers reached the editor to complain about the severe judgment although they confess that the workers' situation is very grave indeed⁵⁰. The paper insists that a thorough and indiscriminate investigation be started. Throughout October, *Gazette* reports frequently on the activities of the Commission, refraining however, from any editorial comment, with the exception of full endorsement for De Naeyer's plan to promote housing for the working classes⁵¹.

And the end of the year the paper reports with a definitely restrained pleasure a „sign of the times”: „The bell-ringers of the churches of the city are on strike. They demand an increase in salary. The chapter of canons is called together to deliberate the issue.”⁵²

In the same edition, *Gazette* attacks the Socialist paper, *Vooruit*, because it has called the workers who have insisted on crossing the picket lines at the factory Smet in Ghent, „cowards”. The paper asks what notion the Socialists have of freedom⁵³. This particular strike in the Smet factory provokes quite a stir in the city and the *Gazette* is aware of it. The paper gets involved as never before. It is obvious that „all the rioting workers are members of *Vooruit*; they repeat in their conversations what they read in *Vooruit*.”⁵⁴ *Gazette* pleads with its readers not to be carried away by the events and it hopes that people will not be so curious as to go and watch whatever may occur at the place of the strike. „Nothing good can be learned there.”⁵⁵

The paper is attacked by some people as being „Socialist inspired” and the *Gazette* reacts to this in a long article in which it is explained that the *Vooruit* is indeed, frequently the source of its information since the Socialist organ is closest to the striking workers and thus has a greater amount of factual information. However, the *Gazette* denies any relation with the Socialists and expresses its disagreement plainly. Simultaneously, *Gazette* reports that the Ghent population, definitely the entire bourgeoisie and the majority of the lower classes, are disgusted with *Vooruit's* attitude towards those workmen who stayed on the job. This attack on freedom of work will give *Vooruit* a bad reputation. *Gazette* explains that „one has to grant the right to strike to all the discontented workers but that they in turn must respect the right and freedom to work for the others.”⁵⁶

The paper reports the evolution of the strike daily, but refrains from any further comment, after it has made its position of non-alignment with the Socialists clear. The sole objective is to give the readers an adequate and honest report on events, people, and situations „without passing judgment on the values or deficiencies of Socialists and others.”⁵⁷

(50) *Ibid.*, Sept. 2, p. 2, c. 3, 4 ; Sept. 3, p. 2, c. 3.

(51) *Ibid.*, Oct. 24, p. 2, c. 2.

(52) *Ibid.*, Nov. 20, p. 2, c. 2.

(53) *Ibid.*, Nov. 20, p. 2, c. 3.

(54) *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, p. 1, c. 4.

(55) *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, p. 2, c. 2.

(56) *Ibid.*, Nov. 22 & 23, p. 2, c. 3.

(57) *Ibid.*, Nov. 22 & 23, p. 2, c. 2.

Summarizing, one could say that the independent press in Ghent does achieve a remarkable neutrality with regard to the social issues of the time in terms of seeking solutions or analyzing causes and effects of certain social movements. On the other hand, both papers, *Volksblad* and *Gazette van Gent*, occasionally do get more involved, but in these cases their involvement is much more on the level of emotion than of practicality or philosophy.