

# The socialist party in the party system and in organised socialism in Belgium\*

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## Introduction.

Belgian political parties have been the subject of ample research and description from the point of view of political history. Foreign as well as Belgian scholars have, to some extent, examined the structure and functioning of the Belgian party system (1). But the very components of the system however, i.e. each one of these political parties, amazingly little research has been carried out. We find ourselves at an initial stage, to which the Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques has contributed greatly with its descriptive studies, often from the organizational viewpoint, of a number of parties, related organisations and pressure groups (2).

This article also goes in that direction, but is confined to the Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) and tries to consider this party from the political

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\* We thank cordially Mrs M. Schepens-Uyterhaegen and Miss G. Boven for the translation.

(1) a.o. LORWIN V., Religion, Class and Language in National Politics, in: DAHL R. *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969 (4th printing).

VAN DEN BRANDE A., Elements for a sociological analysis of the impact of the mean conflicts in Belgian political life, *Res Publica*, 1967, n° 3.

HUYSE L. *Passiviteit, pacifikatie en verzuijing in de Belgische politiek*, Antwerpen, Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1970.

MEYNAUD J., LADRIERE J., PERIN Fr. (dirs), *La Décision politique en Belgique*, Paris, Colin, 1965.

(2) a.o.: *Structures et évolution du « monde catholique » en Belgique*, Bruxelles, CRISP, CH 352-353 du 10 février 1967.

*Structures et évolution du « monde libéral » en Belgique*, Bruxelles, CRISP, CH 522-524, 1971.

*Les structures du « monde socialiste » et leur évolution*, Bruxelles, CRISP, CH 570, 572, 577 et 582, 1972.

system of which it forms a part. It is obvious that, because of a (temporary?) lack of relevant empirical data, we must limit ourselves to a partial survey in which we sometimes do not exceed the stage of hypothesis-formation.

In this paper we intend to situate the BSP in the political system of which it forms a part. But this will only be done partially because only two components of this political system have been chosen as a frame of reference. On one hand, the BSP is a part of the Belgian party system; on the other hand it forms an important part of the socialist organisation complex in Belgium. Between both poles there exists a continual tension.

In the first part we will situate the BSP within the Belgian party system: first we shall outline the BSP electoral support; next its structural position in the party system; finally the stand it takes on the issues of Belgian politics.

In a second part we shall project the BSP on the total socialist organisational complex in Belgium, the so-called socialist « pillar ». First we shall give a short outline of this pillar, secondly we shall indicate how this complex of organisations is bound together, and thirdly a few hypotheses will be formulated with regard to the political functions of the pillar organisations.

## I. Position of the BSP in the Belgian party system.

### A. ELECTORAL SUPPORT.

#### a) *Size of the BSP electorate.*

The BSP has been the second largest party of the country since 1919 (and in recent years the strongest in so far as the Dutch- and French-speaking Christian-democrats are considered as separate formations). She's always been the strongest in Wallonia, on the average the biggest in Brussels-Capitale and the perpetual second in Flanders.

Its general vote percentage has been fairly constant from 1919 till 1961, excluding a few exceptions, namely 34.75 % of the valid votes for the House of Representatives. Since the 1965 parliamentary elections, there has been a sharp decrease to about 28 %, this is almost 7 % less than before.

#### b) *Some sociological characteristics of the BSP electorate.*

According to Delruelle, Evalenko and Fraeys (3) the principal determinants that have a positive effect on the choice pro BSP are on one

(3) DELRUELLE N., EVALENKO R., FRAEYS W., *Le comportement politique des électeurs belges*, Bruxelles, Université libre de Bruxelles, Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie, 1970.

side the fact that one is a non-practising Church member and on the other side the subjective identification with the working class. The proportion of practising Catholics in the BSP electorate is of about 1/4, while according to the same study more than 80 % of the BSP voters not only belong to the socio-professional category of manual and clerical workers but also identify subjectively with the working class.

#### B. STRUCTURAL POSITION OF THE BSP IN THE PARTY SYSTEM.

The Belgian Workers Party (predecessor of the BSP) was a structural opposition party up to World War I: its ideology was considered subversive by the established parties; its parliamentary power was limited because of the limited or unequal suffrage in force, to such an extent that extra-parliamentary activities were important means of pressure. It was not tolerated in the executive branch. It is obvious that the main political objective of that period was the struggle for universal single suffrage (« one man, one vote ») as an instrument of political power acquisition within the political system.

The « traditional » Catholic and Liberal parties had to recognise the BWP as a coalition partner from World War I onward: the war situation and as a partial result, the introduction of universal single suffrage, made it a full-fledged government party. It was indeed impossible to ignore it, for this would only have stimulated its revolutionary *élan* in that troubled period. As a government party it became more and more excepted in more important departments. This process of integration in the political system was finished on the eve of World War II.

From then on the BSP, at the moment with the CVP-PSC and the PVV-PLP in the Leburton-government, has been a so-called « traditional » party. Is this a symptom of blurring contradictions between this type of parties? They are more and more up against the new structural opposition parties, which — with exception of the small Communist Party — have grown mainly out of the difficulties between the Flemings, the Walloons and the french-speaking inhabitants of Brussels. These new parties are the Volksunie (People's Union) in Flanders, the Front Démocratique des Bruxellois Francophones in Brussels and the Rassemblement Wallon in Wallonia. Moreover we must note that an extra-parliamentary and even an extra-structural opposition exists with a certain success.

#### C. POSITION OF THE BSP WITH REGARD TO THE CLEAVAGES IN BELGIAN POLITICS.

a) As for the *socio-economic issues* the BSP takes a leftist stand in the sense that it wants an increase of the role of the state in economic

development, a less unequal income distribution ; it is more sensitive to syndical demands. But it is not the only one. The BSP is in between the small Communist Party (extreme left) and the FDF-RW and VU, wich take moderate stands left of the center.

b) The issues concerning the *relations between Church and State* are connected with the readiness (unreadiness) of the State to give financial aide to Church institution (meanly the private Catholic schools). Recently the content of this cleavage have been broadened : ethical problems, meanly abortion, came into focus. Since in 1961 the anticlerical Liberal Party was made into a pluralist Party for Freedom and Progress, the BSP (together with the Communist Party) is the only anticlerical party, the stands of which are in direct contrast against those of the Christian Social Party.

c) There are also more outspoken contradictions in wich the borderline is not parallel to the organisational borderline between the parties but rather to those of the ethnic communities in Belgium. This borderline is also visible within the BSP, between the Flemings and the French-speaking.

However, the situation is more complicated : the Flemish socialists have always belonged to the « moderate » group in the Flemish emancipation process. Strong regionalisation, ending in federalism, dit not and does not appeal much to them because they feel it will force them into permanent opposition in Flanders. In the early sixties the Walloon socialists passed to a period of radical Wallingantism in wich the demand for federalism was tided to a demand for structural reform in the organisation of the economy. This cannot be seen out of the power context : the BSP is surely the strongest party in Wallonia and would be able to leave a strong mark on an autonomous Walloon policy. Finally, the Brussels BSP has always been in favor of a unitarian or, at least a minimalised regional state structure, because this might endanger the central position of the Brussels *regio*.

In recent years the internal community issues within the BSP have been given less importance, also due to strong pressure from the party top and the structural unity of the party has been more or less restored. The BSP, as a party, has taken on the image of a « state-supporting » party, the only one in the country (after the PVV-PLP left the unitarian ticket) wich takes a minimalising stand on the question of the communities.

## II. The BSP and the socialist organisational complex.

### A. OUTLINE OF SOCIALIST ORGANISATION IN BELGIUM.

The socialist « pillar » has been built on 4 large organisations, which are structurally on a par. Together they are loosely overarched by the deliberation organs of the so-called *Common Action* : a political party, a trade union, a union of mutual health funds and a series of cooperatives. Three out of this four organizations are very large and powerful on their own : The BSP, the General Belgian Labour Union and the National Association of Socialist Mutual Funds (total each one 30 to 40 % of the electoral, syndical respectively mutual sector). The socialist cooperatives, though often large in absolute figures, only represent a fraction of their sector.

A number of organisations and institutions are associated to each one of these four branches of Common Action, e.g. the Socialist Youth Association (with overarches the various socialist youth organisations), the Socialist Women Association, Research and Action Centre for Agriculture, the Office for Socialist Cultural Policy, the National Federation of Independent Workers.

Finally we have a socialist press (5 newspapers : 3 French, 2 Dutch) which represents 1/10 of the total sales of Belgian newspapers, but it is in a precarious commercial situation.

The BSP has been described above. Therefore our outline would be confined to the 3 other branches.

a) *The General Belgian Labour Union* (Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique/Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond).

1° This trade union is a extremely powerful organisation : 886.175 members in 1971 (the second largest union but for the General Christian Union ; 41 % of the syndicated in 1969 were members of the socialist trade unions and 29 % of the total number of syndicated employees ; the high degree of syndicalisation in Belgium not only explains the high number of socialist union members amongst the employees but also the strong position of unions in the social-economic sector). At the social elections of 1971 the socialist labor union got nearly half of the votes. There is a certain numerical balance between the number of Flemish and Walloon syndicated, within between a powerful Brussels regional division, grouping the members in and around the Capital, 14 % of the members.

2° One can see an evolution in the attitude of the union towards the socialist party. Originally socialist syndicalism was one of the constituting

parts on which the socialist party as an indirect party organisation was built. From 1938 on the syndicates started getting organised separately and in 1944 the indirect party structure was definitely broken.

Not only the unions become more independent from the party organisationally, but the fusion, which took place immediately after World War II, between socialist and communist syndicates, was only possible when the new syndicate was able to define a policy rather independent from the parties. The communist influence within the syndicate was very important in the period immediately following the war, but has been on the decline since. At this moment there are no communists in any positions of responsibility. But a similar phenomenon with implications for the attitude of the socialist union towards the socialist party was repeated afterward: a number of syndicated members vote at this moment for the Rassemblement Wallon, the Front des Francophones or the Volksunie (People's Union).

The relatively independent position of the socialist union towards the party is not only explained by the composition of the basis of the union but another possible explanation can be found in the fact that the union finds it necessary to take up a position left from the socialist party because of the threatening alienation of the union apparatus from the basis (wild cat strikes and uncontrolled spontaneous strikes). No surprise then that it is believed that the BSP tends more and more to the centre. A striking illustration of this rather independent bearing of the union is the decision to exclude members of parliament from its national bureau.

Notwithstanding these facts the socialist union is definitely one constituting element of the pillar (see further below).

b) The *National Association of Socialist Mutual Health Funds* (Union Nationale des Mutualités Socialistes/National Verbond van Socialistische Mutualiteiten).

This association consists of 28 mutuality federations and is by far the largest component of the socialist pillar. In cooperation with and with the aid of official services it offers insurance against illness and invalidity. It has also a wide network of hospitals, clinics, medical centers, maternity clinics and dispensaries. With its 1.216.000 « titular » members (9 % independent workers) and with 2.247.750 « supported » members (titular members and the persons in their charge) it dominates approximately 30 % of the mutual health funds « market » in 1970. The Association has more French-speaking than Dutch-speaking members. The Walloon federations represent 42 % of the totality, the Flemish 38 % and the two bilingual federations together 20 %.

A few mutualistic organisations are associated with the Association. They focus on the particular needs of certain groups : the women (Socialistische Vooruitziende Vrouwen ; Les Femmes Prévoyantes Socialistes) and the young people (Mutualiteit der Jonge Arbeiders ; Mutualité des Jeunes Travailleurs).

c) The *Socialist Cooperatives* are grouped on a national basis in the Federation of Belgian Cooperatives (Fédération des Coopératives Belges or FEBECOOP). They have 5 sectors : distribution, dispensers, insurances, savings- and credit system and production. The mean centre of power in the cooperative system is not in the superstructure (FEBECOOP) but in each of the component organizations.

1. The PS-Group (« La Prévoyance Sociale ») (insurances). Typical of the PS in the doctrine of the socialization of profits, decreeing that with part of the profits a number of social institutions will be established and managed by the PS group (psycho-medical-social centres, thermal centres, rest houses, etc...). In 1969 the net income of this group (not including the income of the social works initiated by the group) was 2,45 milliard Belgian Francs and the contributions collected by the PS Group represented 4,39 % of the contributions cached by the total sector.

2. In 1971 the socialist savings-bank Codep managed 4,29 milliard Belgian Francs. In 1968 Codep was the 7th largest private savings-bank in Belgium, representing 2,7 % of the total number of private savings-banks and 0,37 % of the total savings-sector. Next to its major activity savings and credit activities proper, Codep is also a service-institution for the other socialist organizations (accounting, fiscalities, managerial surveys, etc...).

3. The 19 regional consumers' cooperatives of differing sizes, are managing some 1.000 business units (from small retail shops to super-markets). These are organised on a nationwide scale in Coop-Belgium, a cooperative of cooperatives, whose mean business is the central purchases. In 1971 the total turnover of this sector was some 5 milliard Belgian Francs and there were about 320.000 members.

4. In 1971 there were 251 socialist cooperatives dispensers belonging to 9 organizations. Their total turnover was about 1 milliard Belgian Francs.

5. Finally there are 12 production cooperatives amongst wich 10 cooperative printing-businesses, wich print socialist newspapers and editions, amongst others.

#### B. LINKS BETWEEN THE SOCIALIST ORGANISATIONS

Organised socialism is to a large extent interlocked. The following factors contribute to the relatif integration of the several tens of socialist organisations. It is clear that these integrated factors are interdependent, and that the distinctions made by us are often more logical distinctions than real distinctions.

a) *The consciousness of common interests.*

This is, of course, a basic condition for coherent political action. The position of the socialist pillar is in this respect easier than that of the others. Socialist solidarity is based on two cleavages, socio-economic and religious-philosophical, and is therefore more solid than in most rivaling formations (the communist excepted), which are only homogeneous along one dimension. The bargaining process between opposing interests is easier for socialists.

b) *Shared culture.*

The socialist pillar is more than an organisational complex active in the political and syndical field, rendering its members a service, and having an ideology to motivate and account for its actions.

The French term for pillar, « famille spirituelle », denotes more of a spiritual climate than the corresponding Dutch term « zuil » (pillar) which gives more emphasis to the structural dimension. The ideology is only an imperfect rational expression of this spiritual climate or « culture ».

The socialist « world » is a rather closed, autarkic world, with a clear conscience of in- and out-groups. The socialist pillar organises the tradition and culture of a specific part of the population in which the loyalty to a traditional cognitive and affective world is more central than the rational support for certain alternatives of policy. That is why it is difficult for outsiders to feel at home in this world.

For the integrated socialist, socialism is at the same time a belief in the rise of the working class and a defense against the influence of church structures in society, it is an organised defense of collective interests and a mechanism providing solutions for private problems, it stands for a particular kind of policy, a mixture of the culture of urbanisation and some proletarian-informal manners, an ideology, a climate to live in and think in, and even a mechanism satisfying sociability needs. But socialism failed to capture the protest movement of the young.

Socialism can, therefore, have a pretty absolute impact. And as the sovereign state this part of the population has its own symbols and rituals: its red flag, its song, the Internationale and its own « day » namely first of May.

c) *Cumulative memberships.*

There is a strong osmosis on the level of the elite. Organisations belonging to different branches of the Common Action have members in responsible positions who also play an important role in other Socialist organisations. The phenomenon of accumulation of mandates is more striking than in any other party. It is general knowledge that one does not stand a chance of being elected a candidate at the polls (a mechanism



for drawing up the list of candidates) if one is not syndicated with and insured by a socialist organisation and if one does not favor, as a consumer, one of the socialist businesses.

At the basis these cumulative memberships do exist, but to a much lesser extent. The institutional possibilities are such that for many needs it is not necessary to apply to organizations which are not part of the pillar. The perfectly integrated socialist is not only a party and union member and a member of a socialist medical care organisation — his wife makes her household purchases in the small cooperative shop in the neighbourhood, the family is insured with the PS Group and take their savings to Codep. A part of their leisure time is spent in socialist circle (youth organisation or youth-house for the children, socialist cultural organisation for the parents, and socialist pensioners' organisations for the grandparents ; one can even have a vacation organised by socialist institutions specializing in this activity). The list is not exhaustive.

These integrative institutional possibilities are, however, only partly made use of. The number of people who are members of all the four big branches is maximum 200.000 (namely, the branch with the smallest number of members, the party). This number of completely integrated socialists represents only a small minority of socialist voters. One could formulate the hypothesis that the phenomenon of « pillar-boundness » mainly manifests itself on the level of the elite and the militants, rather than on the basic level. The following is an incomplete list, the figures are only approximations :

Number of party members . . . . .	200.000
Number of consumer-members of the cooperatives . . . . .	320.000
Number of union members . . . . .	890.000
Number of members of the health organisations :	
— titular members . . . . .	1.220.000
— Titular members and the persons in their charge	2.250.000
Number of voters . . . . .	1.450.000

#### d) *Common history.*

An element which should not be underestimated is the feeling of solidarity within the socialist movement based on a common history, a common struggle and shared victories.

In origin a movement for the emancipation of the working class, the socialist party can look back upon an often heroic struggle of its militants. The movement can take pride in the fact that it has

contributed significantly to the democratisation of the political system and the improvement of the situation of the labour class.

Sometimes one has the impression that this common tradition is interpreted as a sure sign for a dynamic future.

It is this common tradition which — in part — accounts for the a number of actual options : from the beginning Belgian socialism was anti-church because in its origin it was supported by the freemason movement and it fed by the conservatives of the Catholic politicians of those days. In the socialist culture there has always been a certain unwillingness to recognize the difficulties between Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels as a source of conflict because they dashed with the internationalist tradition.

This common past explains why the several socialist organizations still see each other as members of the same family. This is linked with the collective membership before 1940. The Belgian Workers Party was then the political super-structure of the various socialist organizations (unions, health funds, cooperatives).

e) *Structural ties.*

The 4 large organizations of the socialist pillar are on equal footing. Their representatives meet in the common organs of the socialist Common Action, existing on national, regional and local level. Mostly the Common Action is not more than a whole of loose councils, which form no decisive link in the decision making process, but rather lead a reclusive existence. However, the Common Action increased its importance in periods of political crisis (royal question, school conflict) when its latent function became manifest, and it acted as the central organ that coordinated the often extra-parliamentary actions of the mobilised socialist organizations. However the Common Action has not been active in many years.

It is also provided by statute that the trade unions, the mutual health funds and the cooperatives each one dispose of a representative with advisory vote in the national BSP bureau.

The structural integration within the cooperative movement is not only stimulated by the fact that each of the large cooperative sectors have their representatives in the national bureau of *Fedecoop*, but also by the practice of the « crossed participations », by which different cooperative societies have a participation in each other's capital.

Finally a number of affiliated organisations have their representatives in the top-organs of the « mother »-organisation. E.g. the Socialist Women Movement has 2 representatives in the executive committee of the National Union of Socialist Mutual Health Funds ; the Flemish and French-speaking Young-Socialists have each a representative with advisory vote in the BSP bureau.

## C. SOME POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF THE NON-POLITICAL PILLAR ORGANIZATIONS.

Because empirical verification material is still insufficiently collected, only some hypotheses are formulated here :

a) The existence and functioning of the pillar has a stabilizing effect on the electoral support of the party. First the framing of the most diversified life domains by like-minded organizations has a socializing effect on the citizen. Secondly the extensive services rendered (from taking the necessary step in order to get pensions or building-permits allocated up to making job-placements in the civil service and in socialist organisations) have a positive effect upon the loyalty of the persons concerned.

b) The labor unions, mutual health funds and cooperatives give financial support to party politics, mainly to the election campaigns.

c) The non-political organizations « feel » vague or explicit expectations in their basis with regard to politics, canalize them to collective options, translate them into technical terms, and try to push them politically via the party.

