



Brussels Studies

La revue scientifique électronique pour les recherches sur Bruxelles / Het elektronisch wetenschappelijk tijdschrift voor onderzoek over Brussel / The e-journal for academic research on Brussels

Collection générale | 2015

From the Golden Sixties to 2010: half a century of deindustrialisation and labour disputes in Brussels

Des golden sixties à 2010 : un demi-siècle de désindustrialisation et de conflits sociaux à Bruxelles

Van de golden sixties tot 2010: een halve eeuw desindustrialisatie en sociale conflicten in Brussel

Jean Vandewattyne

Translator: Jane Corrigan



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1315>

DOI: 10.4000/brussels.1315

ISSN: 2031-0293

Publisher

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Electronic reference

Jean Vandewattyne, « From the Golden Sixties to 2010: half a century of deindustrialisation and labour disputes in Brussels », *Brussels Studies* [Online], General collection, no 93, Online since 16 November 2015, connection on 07 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1315> ; DOI : 10.4000/brussels.1315



Licence CC BY

Number 93, November 16th 2015. ISSN 2031-0293

Jean Vandewattyne

From the Golden Sixties to 2010: half a century of deindustrialisation and labour disputes in Brussels

Translation: Jane Corrigan

The article covers almost half a century of strikes which took place in industrial companies in Brussels, beginning with the major strike in the winter of 1960-61 until 2010. The selection of these labour disputes was based either on certain characteristics of the disputes, such as their harshness and symbolic character, or on their emblematic character with respect to the Brussels economic reality of the company concerned.

The article focuses in particular on two major periods. The first period corresponds to the end of the post-war economic boom and was marked by some hard, long and offensive strikes regarding working conditions. In particular, they brought to the fore the question of the position of 'foreign' workers in work organisations as well as in the world of trade unions. The second period covers the beginning of the 1980s until 2010, and had the economic crisis, unemployment and new managerial policies as a backdrop. The disputes were defensive, with the negotiation of social plans related to restructuring and the shutting down of sites as their main issue. The question of the respect of union rights was also a reason for the disputes.

Jean Vandewattyne is a doctor of social sciences. He teaches at Université de Mons and Université libre de Bruxelles. As a member of Groupe d'Analyse des Conflits sociaux (Gracos), his research focuses mainly on new forms of organisation, staff management and labour disputes. Since 2011, he has contributed each year to the CRISP Courriers hebdomadaires which cover the strikes and labour disputes of the preceding year.

Jean Vandewattyne, jean.vandewattyne@umons.ac.be

Benjamin Wayens (Senior Editor), +32(0)2 211 78 22, bwayens@brusselsstudies.be

Introduction

1. This article draws a parallel between the evolution of the industrial fabric of the Brussels region and the labour disputes in private-sector companies. The period analysed covers almost half a century, and begins with the major strike in the winter of 1960-61 and ends in 2010 with the labour dispute at Godiva.
2. The disputes discussed in this article were open disputes, with strikes being an essential aspect. This results in a simplistic view of labour disputes, in the sense that the absence of strikes does not indicate the absence of industrial tensions. A strike is often just a method of action used as a last resort, with a significant part of the labour dispute remaining 'latent' or 'at a low intensity', which makes it difficult for the outside observer to understand.
3. A qualitative methodology has been used. This choice is partly based on the fact that the available statistical data are scarce and imprecise from a geographical point of view [Vandaele, 2010 and Gracos, 2011]. The days of strikes were counted based on the location of head offices, which biases the regional analyses due to their concentration in Brussels. Furthermore, the approach used allows a more detailed analysis of the dynamics at work, which is important due to the fact that a strike may be defensive or offensive, long-lasting or short-lived, etc. Its objects and issues may be varied (working conditions, remunerations, safeguarding of employment, negotiation of a social plan, etc.) and often numerous. Moreover, stakeholders may develop a variety of strategies and tactics to influence the balance of power and assert their interests: strike picket, detention, police, penalty payment, bailiff, demonstration, etc.
4. While the qualitative approach seems to be the most appropriate, it does have its limits. Among these is the question of available sources. The collective labour relations in Brussels have not been the object of

many written works, thus requiring major research work based on interviews with contact people – essentially union representatives and paid officials – and a non-systematic analysis of journals – such as *Année sociale*, *Contradictions* and *La Revue Nouvelle* – as well as the daily and weekly press. The period considered and the abundance of facts led us to choose only the most significant disputes in terms of social dynamics. Admittedly, the choices made involve a certain amount of subjectivity.

5. The analysis proposed is based on three major 'moments', namely the strike in the winter of 1960-61 against the single law, the end of the 'post-war economic boom' with essentially offensive and qualitative disputes, and the decades from 1980 to 2010, with defensive disputes whose main issue was the negotiation of social plans.

1. Brussels and the major strike of 1960-61

6. At the moment of the 1960-61 strike, Brussels was the biggest industrial city in Belgium in terms of employment. Within the 19 municipalities, a little more than 166,000 people worked in industry, compared with nearly 100,000 in Liège, 87,000 in Antwerp, 56,000 in Charleroi and 48,000 in Ghent. However, in terms of 'class consciousness' and 'fighting spirit', it appeared to be lagging behind urban centres such as Liège, as well as Antwerp and Ghent in Flanders, i.e. 'regions where working-class traditions are alive, where social struggles have always been ardent, where urban life shapes the political consciousness and where the working-class districts preserve specific traits (e.g. the mining villages) as creators and guardians of the working-class consciousness' [Bolle de Bal, 1961]. This analysis is shared by Féaux, according to whom 'it is typical to observe that the strike was especially solid in the regions with old economic structures and a strong union tradition' [1963].

7. In Brussels, 'no declaration of a general strike or a return to work was made by the Brussels regional FGTB' [Féaux, 1963]. The strike there was led mainly by workers from the public sector, who were particularly affected by the proposed single law [Connan and Lebrun, 2011], from the metal industry and, more sporadically, from the port, tramways and large shops. There were demonstrations almost daily. In total, the strike lasted nearly three weeks in Brussels and five weeks in the most combative regions, and left a deep mark on the trade union movement.¹

2. The dispute at the end of the 'post-war economic boom'

8. In 1961, industrial employment began to decrease in the capital [De Beule, 1994]. Between 1964 and 1972, Brussels lost 60,000 industrial jobs [Godfroid, 1998], i.e. just over a third of the jobs which existed at the beginning of the 1960s. These losses were largely due to the 'relocations' outside the city and in particular the district of Halle-Vilvoorde. According to Bauwin [1976], no less than 167 industries left Brussels between 1960 and 1974, taking 15,600 jobs with them. The companies which left the city were fairly large for the most part. The disappearance of activities was mainly due to the small companies.

9. In the socioeconomic context of the 'Golden Sixties', these job losses did not lead to a particular dispute. Although industrial employment was on the decline, there were still a considerable number of jobs thanks to the development of services. The disputes, which marked the social history of Brussels, occurred mainly in the first months of 1970 and involved the improvement of working conditions. These disputes were very harsh as well as characteristic of the social climate of the

time,² and took place at the Citroën factory in Forest, the Michelin factory in Sint-Pieters-Leeuw [Shin, 2012] and the Nestor Martin factory in Ganshoren.

10. In its comparative analysis of the disputes during the first half of 1970, CRISP underlined that 'the workers' conditions' were considered as artificially very difficult in the sense that they 'blamed them on the unwillingness of the management or the harshness of bosses' [1970] and not on a natural constraint, as in the mines, or on a technical constraint, as in the blast furnaces.

11. Furthermore, these strikes also brought out a very clear split between the workers and the trade union organisations which were supposed to represent them. According to CRISP, the attitude of workers at the origin of the movement – 'foreigners for the most part (but not only)' – 'was rather favourable to unions, which they hoped would take things in hand as soon as they were 'enlightened' on the actual situation. These workers would therefore gradually discover the degree and the forms of institutionalisation of Belgian trade unionism, for example through the length of validity of agreements or the length of the representatives' terms' [1970]. While the trade union organisations quickly regained control of the movement at Nestor Martin and Citroën, the same was not true at Michelin. In this factory, the opposition between, on the one hand, the *Comité Ouvrier* and the strikers and, on the other hand, the union structures symbolised mainly by the Brussels section of the chemicals sector of the FGTB *Centrale Générale*, was a main aspect of the dispute for a long time.

12. Finally, in these disputes, 'national solidarity reinforced class solidarity' thus revealing 'a phenomenon apparently ignored or at least rarely taken into consideration by public opinion and by management

¹ With respect to the social consequences of the strike, Pierre Tilly points out that 'despite the breach of the social peace, the principle of social dialogue emerges strengthened in the long term, like the consultation with social partners, the principle of a national and interprofessional agreement' [2011]. It goes hand in hand with 'the strengthening of a market economy guided by a distribution of the fruits of growth backed by the stakeholders during the 1954 declaration regarding productivity. For more than a decade, until the mid 1970s, this Fordist compromise guaranteed full employment overall despite the sirens of the Walloon decline which are starting to be heard' [Tilly, 2011].

² As noted by Michel Capron, 'At the dawn of the 1970s, turbulence emerged in the working-class struggle, where all of the components of the working class are mixed and whose forms of action, from company to company, go from massive strike pickets to demonstrations in the streets, and include surprise strikes and occupations. The workers' action was rejuvenated: undisciplined, imaginative, enthusiastic just like its protagonists, and violent when it shakes and weakens the foundations of social dialogue' [1988].

and labour: the formation of true class communities in the different national groups of foreign workers. These communities – which had for a long time been centred on aid for militant workers in Spain, Greece, Portugal, etc. – gradually discovered the reality of the working-class struggle in Belgium; while for a long time they had limited themselves to following the movements triggered by workers of Belgian nationality at Michelin as well as at Citroën and in Limburg, they instead showed some initiative' [CRISP, 1970]. In fact, with these disputes, a wave of immigration – often arriving in Belgium for political reasons – appeared on the labour scene.

3. The more recent disputes: from 1980 to 2010

13. In a context of deep economic crisis, in many respects the 1980s constituted a pivotal decade. At political level, the neo-liberal doctrine was beginning to triumph, as evidenced by the coming to power of Thatcher in Great Britain and Reagan in the United States. It was also at this time that a major modernisation movement took shape in companies, in terms of new information and communication technologies as well as the revival of managerial ideas and practices: 'just-in-time' production, participative management by quality circles, company culture, human resources management, etc.

14. Although Brussels was still the biggest industrial city in the country in the mid 1970s, i.e. at the beginning of the economic crisis, deindustrialisation was more pronounced there. From 1970 to 2000, manufacturing employment dropped by nearly 75% in Brussels compared with nearly 50% in the country as a whole. The only noteworthy exception was VW Forest, by far the biggest industrial company in Brussels. At the beginning of the 2000s, the German manufacturer created an additional 1000 jobs [Vandermotten, 2005]. This exception finally ended in 2006 when VW left and the site was taken over by Audi.

15. With respect to the social dynamics in Brussels, deindustrialisation led to the shutting down of the main 'bastions' of the working-class struggles from the end of the 'post-war economic boom': Citroën closed its doors in 1980 followed by Michelin and Nestor Martin in 1986. More broadly, the deindustrialisation movement caused the working-class concentrations to disappear and created a feeling of social vulnerability among workers and the working classes. At the same time, many jobs were lost in the inner suburbs of Brussels with the shutting down of Renault Vilvoorde in 1997,³ the bankruptcy of Sabena in 2001 and the decision by DHL in 2004 to move its intercontinental 'hub' from Zaventem to Leipzig in former East Germany.

16. Unlike the 1960s, this time the disappearance of industrial jobs was at the origin of many disputes whose central issue was to obtain the best redundancy arrangements possible. The question of the safeguarding of employment gradually became secondary or even anecdotal. However, beginning in 1990, FGTB in Brussels attempted to reverse the process by making deindustrialisation a major regional issue. It felt that the preservation of industrial jobs was essential in order to respond to the specificities of unemployment in Brussels, which affected 'many unskilled and immigrant workers', and to prevent 'Brussels from becoming a vast zone of offices' [FGTB/Brussels, 1993]. One of the motivating factors behind this position was the threat to jobs in three industrial companies in the region: the battery manufacturer Doyen (250 workers) in Anderlecht, the Illochroma printing works (400 workers) in Uccle and Carcoke-Marly (310 jobs) in Neder-Over-Heembeek. While the first company had plans to relocate in order to meet its expansion needs, the location of the other two companies was questioned – as a sign of the times – due to the environmental pollution they caused.

17. In Brussels, the decline in industrial employment went hand in hand with the development of the service sector, which was partly the result of the transformation of 'industrial' jobs into jobs providing 'services to companies' via subcontracting mechanisms. For workers, this transfer to the service economy often resulted in a deterioration of

³ In this regard, Antoine Bevort and Annette Jobert underline that, for certain observers, the dispute caused by the shutting down of Vilvoorde marked a turning point in European mobilisations 'with the first one-hour strike at all of the European sites and a demonstration on 16 March 1997 in Brussels, gathering more than 70,000 people' [2008].

working conditions related to the shift from one joint commission to another and to the emergence of a logic favouring undeclared work and the use of illegal immigrants in a city with 'a large reserve of illegal labour' [FGTB/Brussels, 2006]. These new organisational practices also made union work much more difficult in addition to hindering the emergence of an individual or collective *voice* [Hirschman, 1974], i.e. the ability to speak out and, by extension, commit to the struggle.

18. While VW Forest had been an exception with respect to the deindustrialisation movement for many years, the same was true with regard to the labour dispute. The open dispute was a strong dimension of the collective labour relations. In 1990, its chairman and CEO said that he was 'exasperated' by the two different faces of the trade unions: 'Modern trade unionism in the texts and doctrines, and dynamic trade unionism on the ground.'⁴ More precisely, these disputes above all revealed issues related to the technological, organisational and managerial modernisation of big companies deeply rooted in the Taylorist and Fordist tradition [Bouquin, 2006]. At the same time, the workers at VW were very active in the struggles against the austerity policies such as the general plan in 1993 and the generation pact in 2005. To some extent, it was a symbolic continuation of the workers' struggles at Citroën, Michelin and Nestor Martin at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

19. Beginning in the 1980s, the negotiation of social plans became a major issue in the labour disputes. These disputes were in keeping with a purely defensive approach.

3.1. The negotiation of social plans

20. The negotiation of social plans followed the decision to undergo restructuring aimed either at reducing the workforce or at simply closing a site. The shutting down of a site was at the heart of three disputes which were particularly symbolic of the deindustrialisation of Brussels: Côte d'Or in 1988, Philip Morris in 1993 and Volkswagen in 2006.

3.1.1. Côte d'Or

21. In 1987-88, the multinational Jacobs Suchard took over Côte d'Or, which had been a family business until then. Soon afterwards, the management announced a strategic plan – called '1992' – involving the removal of 270 jobs, the redundancy of 500 people and the construction of an 'ultramodern' factory in the Halle industrial zone, intended to replace the one in Rue Bara, close to the South Station. Following the announcement of this plan, the staff of this '*véritable maison bruxelloise*' – according to the time-honoured expression – went on strike for the first time in 35 years.

22. An agreement was made after 13 days of strikes. Although the workers did not succeed in preventing the relocation, the strike allowed a reduction in the number of job cuts and redundancies (from 500 to 348) while obtaining high wage compensations for the workers who lost their jobs. In her analysis of the dispute, Bénédicte Vaes, a journalist at *Le Soir*, underlined that while 'the employees' confederations tried, in vain, to renegotiate the restructuring', 'the workers' confederations – which have a major role – accepted most of the rationalisations in exchange for 90% of the net income for six years for the people who would be laid off without benefitting from an early retirement pension. For the workers, six years of wages was obviously a very enticing perspective, especially as the wages were high – in exchange for difficult working conditions – in the "conches" department which acted as a trigger.' According to the journalist, the unions succeeded in 'raising the social bidding, without changing the direction of economic decisions.'⁵

3.1.2. Philip Morris

23. At the end of 1993, the workers at the Philip Morris site in Ixelles received a letter announcing that 'drastic measures' would soon be taken in order to allow the group to 'remain a healthy company at international level' [Detroyer and Krzeslo, 1994]. A few months later, the management of the Belgian division announced the shutting down of its factory in Ixelles, which employed 512 people in the manufacturing of

⁴ *Trends-Tendances*, 6 September 1990.

⁵ *Le Soir*, 5 October 1988. 'Conchage' is a chocolate refining process.

cigarettes. Acting as a common front, the workers occupied the factory and organised different actions such as the blocking of other Belgian sites of the American multinational.

24. Very symbolically, the result of these actions was to delay the shutting down of the site by one month. The agreement also stipulated that the workers would be able to benefit from the early retirement pension as of age 50, that they would be informed first of any jobs available in the company – Philip Morris still has a head office in Watermael-Boitsfort, a factory in Forest and a distribution centre in Zaventem – and that those who wished to retrain or go into business on their own would receive a bonus. While the early retirement pension had become the usual means of managing excess staff due to restructuring, the last two points were quite innovative.

3.1.3. VW Forest

25. On several occasions, there had been more or less explicit threats of major job cuts at the VW site in Forest, and even of shutting down. This scenario finally became a reality at the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007. Following the company's poor results, the German workers accepted an increase in their working hours – in particular by doing away with the four-day week in the factories in deficit in West Germany – with no wage increase in exchange for the increase in production; this could only result in reduced production outside Germany. In this context, during the 21 November works council meeting, the management of VW Forest announced that 4,000 jobs would be cut and that the production of the Golf would be transferred to Germany.

26. Following this announcement, the factory in Forest was paralysed for seven weeks by a particularly long and hard strike. The struggle for the future of the site also led to a show of solidarity gathering between 15,000 and 25,000 people, many negotiations as well as various interventions on behalf of politicians such as Liberal Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, whose intervention was given a lot of media coverage. At the beginning of December, the management of VW hinted that the Forest site could be used for the production of the Audi A1, which would

guarantee employment for nearly 3,000 workers from 2009 to 2016 and would put an end to the speculations regarding plans to shut down the site in two phases. However, the German management had certain conditions, such as an improvement of the competitiveness of the site in Brussels.

27. In the end, the unions succeeded in negotiating particularly advantageous conditions for the workers who would lose their jobs, with severance bonuses varying between €25,000 and €144,000 according to length of service, which is '*unique and exceptional with respect to Belgian standards*.'⁶ On 19 December, the early retirement pension was the object of an agreement which stipulated that the workers would be able to benefit from an early retirement pension as of age 50 instead of age 55, in principle. The agreement also stipulated that VW would be responsible for 100% (for the workers) and 90% (for the employees) of the difference between the last gross monthly salary and the unemployment benefits, which equals an 'exceptional concession'. In mid February, the negotiations regarding redundancy arrangements for employees also had a very positive outcome. On the one hand, the unions were able to limit the number of forced redundancies to less than 100. On the other hand, they obtained severance bonuses between €29,000 and €196,000, according to length of service.

28. However, the agreements made with subcontractors were far less advantageous for the workers given a much less favourable balance of power due to the size of the subcontracting companies and the distance between the places of negotiation. But the bitter pill was swallowed by the workers who went from VW to Audi. In a position of power, the management of Audi demanded and obtained major concessions in exchange for its establishment in Forest. Thus, the remaining workers had to accept a 20% reduction in their wages and new flexibility measures at work, such as the '*plus minus conto*' allowing the working time to be adapted according to the life cycle of the model produced.

⁶ *Le Soir*, 8 December 2007.

3.2. The other reasons for the labour dispute

29. Even if it is often a question of restructuring, certain labour disputes bring out other tensions and issues. This is the case with the defence of union rights, the consequences of the use of subcontracting and the reduction in working time.

3.2.1. Union rights

30. In the cases analysed, the defence of union rights does not appear to be at the origin of the dispute. On the contrary, it is above all the expression of an intensification of the dispute following the management's wish to lay off union representatives considered as too 'annoying' or 'radical'. This was the case in particular in 2000 at Léonidas and in 2008 at Italian Automotive Center (IAC), the official distributor of Fiat in Belgium.

31. At Léonidas (250 workers) in Anderlecht, the origin of the dispute was the management's wish to introduce teamwork and to reduce the workforce in order to cope with the negative evolution of the market. Due to the opposition it faced with respect to its project, in January 2000, the management decided to make eight workers redundant. In reaction to this, the union delegation announced its intention to call a strike. The management then proceeded to lay off two representatives considered as 'annoying', and the workers, acting as a common front, went on strike. A legal decision put an end to the strike by threatening the strikers with a penalty payment of 200,000 BEF – €5,000 – per day and per person prevented from working. An agreement was made nearly three months later. It ended in the redundancy of 73 workers, including the two representatives, in exchange for a social plan consisting of additional financial compensation for the redundant workers and access to training for those who wished to reintegrate themselves in other sectors of activity.

32. At IAC (90 jobs), the dispute followed the announcement at the end of 2008 of a new restructuring plan proposing the shutting down of 'company divisions', i.e. the Delta shop and the Meiser workshop, and the redundancy of 25 workers, 12 of whom were covered by the law of

19 March 1991 on the protection of union representatives. The dispute became more radical in April when the workers showed their discontent in the offices where a meeting was being held between the management and the union delegation. On this occasion, the management spoke of detention, which the workers and their representatives contested. Following this incident, the events moved on quickly with an important judicial aspect. In mid May, the dispute took a new direction with the dismissal of five workers 'for gross misconduct', three of whom were union representatives. On 3 November, the Labour Court agreed with the union theory according to which IAC must be considered as a technical operational unit. Two days later, the Labour Court considered that the workers were not guilty of 'serious misconduct' in the framework of their union struggle, and in its judgement it underlined that the participation in a strike and a demonstration 'does not exceed the limits of the right to strike which all workers are entitled to. It is an individual labour law issue which deserves as much protection as the employer's property right.'⁷

33. Finally, at the end of November, the management of IAC stated that they wished to move on, and notified nine union representatives of their redundancy. In a press release, SETCa, FGTB Métal, CSC Métal and CNE estimated that the financial cost of this decision was equivalent to nearly 50 years of wages for the nine representatives and they hoped that this 'disaster' would serve as an 'example to employers, demonstrating that the use of force, the anti-union frontal attack and the jurisdiction of a restructuring lead to catastrophe'.

3.2.2. The externalisation of activities and the use of subcontracting

34. Beginning in the 1980s, under the influence of Japanese management in particular, companies have gradually refocused on their basic trades and have entrusted the least strategic activities to subcontractors [Rorive, 2006]. In 2004, at VW Forest, this policy led to the 'Automotive Park', which grouped together the company's main suppliers in an area connected to the factory. Due to its impact on workers, the use of subcontracting has added to the labour dispute over the

⁷ Brussels Labour Court, RG 2009/AB/52381. Available at the address: http://www.terralaboris.be/IMG/pdf_CTB_2009_11_05_2009_AB_52381.pdf

past three decades. This is the case in particular in the cleaning sector, whose development is due greatly to outsourcing practices, and to Godiva, a company which is emblematic of the Brussels economy.

35. On 1 March 2010, the management of Godiva (360 workers in Koekelberg) announced to the works council that it intended to refocus its activities in Brussels on the manufacturing of chocolate. It would thus subcontract the packaging of its products to a sheltered workshop and cut 90 jobs. The company then idled for two weeks. It stopped operations completely on 16 March during the meeting between the union delegation and the Brussels Employment Minister. The case is particularly symbolic with regard to the unemployment problem in Brussels, in the sense that the jobs which the management of Godiva planned to cut were held by low-skilled women who lived mainly in the Brussels region.

36. The dispute intensified when the management announced its intention to resort to a 'lock-out' – a practice which is used very little by employers – as of 12 April. It finally implemented the threat a few days earlier due to the workers' violation of 'their contractual obligations' and 'safety and fire regulations'. The dispute finally ended following the intervention of social conciliators whose proposal involved the redeployment of 12 workers within the company, the early retirement pension as of age 52, additional early retirement pension compensation covering 80% of the difference between the net salary and the unemployment benefit, the preservation of hospital insurance for those who had taken an early retirement and the payment of normal wages to all workers during 'lock-out' days.

3.2.3. The reduction in working time

37. Beginning in the 1980s, the demand for a reduction in working time gradually lost ground due to the flexibility requirements of management. VW Forest is a particularly symbolic example of this trend.

38. In 1991, the VW workers began their fight in favour of a 35-hour work week. While this demand appeared to be a response to the management's wish to reduce staff, it was also in keeping with a European

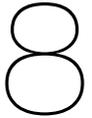
strategy whose starting point was for German workers in the metal industry to obtain 35 hours beginning in October 1995. Immediately following this victory, the VW European Works Council was committed to obtaining 35 hours for all of the company's workers in Europe.⁸ The strike in Forest was a realisation of this commitment. It lasted six days without, however, making any headway in terms of working time.

39. The reduction in working time reappeared in 1994 in the framework of the negotiation regarding the renewal of the company's collective labour agreement. This negotiation led to another big dispute in which the VW board of directors underlined the existence of a structural overcapacity in the group, more or less corresponding to the production capacity of the Brussels factory. This declaration, which was interpreted as a form of 'blackmail', resulted in making the strikers' position more radical. The strike was then declared to the finish. Following the workers' rejection of a preliminary agreement, the management declared an 'illegal strike' and asked the non-striking staff to be at the factory gates. At the same time, it obtained a judgement ordering a penalty payment of 100,000 BEF per day and per person prevented from working. The risk of seeing the dispute degenerate weighed heavily on the negotiation and the strategies of stakeholders. Finally, it ended in the signature of a three-year collective agreement including the establishment of the 36-hour week.

40. In 1997, the workers at VW obtained 35 hours for the daytime team and 32 hours for the night-time team. It is interesting to point out that the negotiation for this new reduction in working time did not lead to a stoppage or a strike, even when the management had mentioned that 1,500 jobs would be cut.

41. The working time issue resurfaced once again in 2006 with the arrival of Audi in Forest. In exchange for its establishment there, the management of Audi demanded and obtained a major reduction in wages and flexibility measures at work, which resulted in a return to 38 hours and the working time being adapted according to the life cycle of the product.

⁸ With the exception of SEAT in Spain.



Conclusion

42. With respect to the industrial dimension as well as labour disputes, the dynamics seen in Brussels go well beyond the city limits.

43. On the one hand, deindustrialisation is not at all specific to Brussels. This movement is seen in all of the long industrialised regions of Europe. The differences which may exist are related especially to the period when the process began and to its speed. In Brussels, deindustrialisation was first seen at the beginning of the 1960s, and continued – with the emerging economic crisis – at a faster speed than in the other regions of the country. In the context of the *Golden Sixties*, deindustrialisation does not seem to have led to large-scale social struggles. This is explained mostly by a job market characterised by full employment, the fact that job losses were mainly due to small- and medium-sized companies and that part of these losses were the result of a relocation to the hinterland of the Brussels region. The situation was quite different following the economic crisis. At that time, the restructuring became the object of many social struggles in the Brussels region as in many other regions. With the crisis, places which were emblematic of the labour dispute at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s also closed permanently.

44. On the other hand, the disputes analysed are also in keeping with wider dynamics. Like elsewhere in Europe, the significant disputes at the end of the post-war economic boom were essentially offensive and qualitative. They were also led by immigrant workers who were still referred to by some as 'foreigners'. Under the weight of the economic crisis and new managerial policies – which, from the beginning of the 1980s, would reshape the reality of work and organisations in the secondary as well as tertiary sectors – the strikes became above all defensive, with the negotiation of social plans as their main issue. Very atypically, the last great trade union victory goes back to 1997, with the implementation of the 35-hour week at VW. This victory owes much to the influence of IG Metal in Germany and its wish to use the reduction in working time to fight unemployment.

45. Finally, it is interesting to note that industrial leadership in Brussels has not resulted in particularly vocal and combative trade unionism at national level. This is probably due to the fact that small- and medium-sized industries have made up a significant part of the industrial fabric, unlike, for example, in Charleroi and Liège. Moreover, many industrial jobs have been held by commuters, which has had an impact on the collective dynamics.⁹ This dissociation between the place of work and the living place in effect raises the issue of pertinent communities in collective action [Segrestin, 1980] while making mobilisations more difficult.

⁹ At the beginning of the 2000s, nearly 6 out of 10 jobs in Brussels were held by commuters.

Bibliography

- BAUWIN, E., 1976. *Contribution à l'étude de la région industrielle bruxelloise et de ses problèmes*, doctoral thesis, ULB.
- BEVORT, A. and JOBERT, A., 2008. *Sociologie du travail : les relations professionnelles*, Armand Colin.
- BOLLE DE BAL, M., 1961. Les sociologues, la conscience de classe et la grande grève belge de l'hiver 60-61, In: *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie*, ULB, n° 3.
- BOUQUIN, S., 2006. *La valse des écrous. Travail, capital et action collective dans l'industrie automobile*, Ed. Syllepse.
- CAPRON, M., 2007. VW Forest, un conflit social atypique, In: *La Revue Nouvelle*, January-February.
- CAPRON, M., 1988. La mutation des luttes ouvrières, In: *La Revue Nouvelle*, April-May.
- CLAVORA, F., 1973. Les grèves sauvages, In: *La Revue Nouvelle*, March.
- CONNAN, M.-P. and Lebrun, M., 2011, Contribution de la CGSP à la grève de 1960-1961, In: FRANCQ, B., COURTOIS, L. and TILLY, P., *La Mémoire de la grande grève de l'hiver 1960-1961 en Belgique*, Le Cri édition.
- CRISP. 1970. *Le conflit social à l'usine Michelin (fin 1969-mi 1970) dans le contexte des grèves sauvages*, n° 491, September.
- CSC/Bruxelles-Halle-Vilvoorde. 2000. *Ne touche pas à mon délégué*.
- DE BEULE, M., 1994. *Bruxelles, une ville industrielle méconnue : impact urbanistique de l'industrialisation*, La fonderie.
- DETROYER, M. and KRZESLO, E., 1994. Philip Morris : à prendre ou à laisser ? L'emploi industriel à Bruxelles, In: *Année Sociale*.
- FALISSE, J. and ANDRÉ, S., 1973. La grève des employés de banque de juin 1972 ; ses significations, In: *Contradictions*.
- FÉAUX, V., 1963. *Cinq semaines de lutte sociale. La grève de l'hiver, 1960-1961*, Institut de sociologie de l'Université libre de Bruxelles.
- FRANCQ, B., COURTOIS, L. and TILLY, P., 2011, *La Mémoire de la grande grève de l'hiver 1960-1961 en Belgique*, Le Cri édition.
- FGTB de Bruxelles, 2006. Mutations industrielles et transformation du travail : quelles perspectives syndicales pour la FGTB de Bruxelles ?, In: *Les dossiers de la FGTB de Bruxelles*, n° 8, February.
- FGTB/Centrale Générale Bruxelles-Vlaams Brabant, 2004. Statutory Congress.
- FGTB/Bruxelles. 1993. *Congrès Statutaire*.
- GODFROID, Y., 1998. Les années 90 : l'affirmation du fait syndical à Bruxelles, In: le Fil rouge d'un siècle de syndicalisme, In: *Dossier de la Fonderie*, n° 3.
- GRACOS, I., 2012, Grèves et conflictualité sociale en 2011, In: *Courrier hebdomadaire*, CRISP, n° 2135-2136.
- LA FONDERIE, 1992. Travailler chez Volkswagen, Entretien avec Denis Rega et Claude Dufrasne, In: *Les cahiers de la Fonderie*, December, n° 13.
- HIRSCHMAN, A., 1974. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Harvard University Press.
- HOUBEN, H., 1991. Grève pour les 35 heures à Volkswagen Forest, In: *Année Sociale*.
- HOUBEN, H., 1994. Les conditions de travail au cœur du conflit à VW Bruxelles : une conséquence des nouvelles organisations de la production, In: *Année Sociale*.
- NEUVILLE, J. and YERNA, J., 1990. *Le choc de l'hiver 60-61. Les grèves contre la loi unique*, Pol-His.
- POLITIQUE (Les hors série de), 2009. *Syndicat, éducation et formation*, n° 11, May.
- RORIVE, B., 2006. *De la pyramide au réseau » : les transformations de la grande entreprise*, Les dossiers de la FGTB de Bruxelles.

- VANDERHULST, G., (no date). *L'industrialisation de la Région bruxelloise*, electronic document.
- REYNAUD, J.-D., 1982. *Sociologie des conflits du travail*, Que sais-je ?
- SEGRESTIN, D., 1980. Les communautés pertinentes de l'action collective, In: *Revue française de sociologie*, XXI, April-June.
- SHIN, D., 2012. Main-d'œuvre immigrée et revendications « qualitatives », In: *Revue belge d'Histoire contemporaine*, n° 1.
- TILLY, P., 2011, Les acteurs socio-économiques avant, pendant et après la grève : du changement dans la continuité ?, In: FRANCO, B., COURTOIS, L. and TILLY, P., *La Mémoire de la grande grève de l'hiver 1960-1961 en Belgique*, Le Cri édition.
- VANDAELE, K., 2010, Les statistiques de grèves et leur exploitation, In: *Courrier hebdomadaire*, CRISP, n° 2079, 2010.
- VANDERMOTTEN, C. and MARISSAL, P., 2004. *La production des espaces économiques*, Tome 1, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles.
- VANDERMOTTEN, C., 2005. Évolution et perspectives de l'industrie manufacturière bruxelloise, In: *Les dossiers de la FGTB de Bruxelles*.
- VANDEWATTYNE, J., 2010, Conflictualité sociale en milieu industriel à Bruxelles : De la grande grève de 60-61 à la fermeture de VW-Forest, In: *Les cahiers de la Fonderie*, n° 42, pp. 27-34.

To cite this text

VANDEWATTYNE, Jean, 2015. From the Golden Sixties to 2010: half a century of deindustrialisation and labour disputes in Brussels, In: *Brussels Studies*, Number 93, November 16th 2015, www.brusselsstudies.be

Financial support

Brussels Studies gets published with the support of:



Innoviris, the Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation



University Foundation



Fonds international Wernaers pour la recherche et la diffusion des connaissances



Fonds de la Recherche scientifique

Links

Other versions of this text are available

ePub FR : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS93FREPUBLIC>

ePub NL : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS93NLEPUBLIC>

ePub EN : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS93ENEPUBLIC>

pdf FR : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS93FRPDF>

pdf NL : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS93NLPDF>

pdf EN : <http://tinyurl.com/BRUS93ENPDF>

The videos published in *Brussels Studies* can be watched on the *Brussels Studies* Vimeo channel, available here: <http://vimeo.com/channels/BruS>