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Obituary

Memories of Gilbert Leclercq

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Our friend and comrade Gilbert Leclercq (3/6/1929 – 29/11/2025) passed away on Saturday, November 29, at the age of 96. Below, we publish a selection of his memoirs. They cover his childhood in Mont Sainte-Aldegonde, his classical studies at the Royal Athenaeum of Morlanwelz, his entry into the Resistance at the age of 14, his early adherence to the Fourth International, his life as a bricklayer, and his uninterrupted participation—both in trade unionism and in politics—in the struggles of the working class after the war (in particular the "strike of the century" of 1960-61, in which he was a leading figure in his region). The text concludes with the major (and victorious) construction strike of 1968, in which Gilbert played a key role, extending far beyond the Centre region.

The fact that the narrative ends with this event should not be misinterpreted: it is because he never ceased fighting for the emancipation of workers that Gilbert did not take the time to finish his memoirs. From 1968 until the eve of his death, our comrade remained fully aware of and totally committed to the struggle against capitalist exploitation and oppression. He thus actively participated in the Friday strikes against the Tindemans government (1977), in the great wave of struggles against the "special powers" of the Martens governments (1982-88), in the movement against the "Global Plan" of the Dehaene government (1993), and in solidarity with numerous workplace struggles (for example, those of the Limburg miners, the Glaverbel glassworkers, and the workers at the Clabecq steelworks). In 1995 and beyond, Gilbert also played a significant role in supporting the fight for truth led by the parents of the young girls who were victims of Marc Dutroux. Close to Gino and Carine Russo, he and other comrades led a network of "white committees" in his region.

Throughout these years, our comrade wrote numerous short pieces on a wide range of subjects. The Gauche Anticapitalist will consider publishing them. At the same time, he remained deeply involved in the development and debates of our organization, never missing a meeting. A bricklayer by trade, the son of a miner and a homemaker, Gilbert, an avid reader, possessed a solid revolutionary Marxist background. From his mentor Gonzales Decamps, a professor in Morlanwelz and a Trotskyist activist, he inherited a constant concern for introducing workers to the history of struggles and Marxist theory, which he presented simply but without oversimplification, like Ernest Mandel, always bringing everything back to Marx's famous maxim: "The emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves."

Gilbert's commitment was the antithesis of sectarianism. For several years, he had systematically drawn attention to the urgent need for unity in anti-capitalist action in the face of the danger of the far right exploiting social frustrations within the working class itself in order to recruit disaffected elements to the service of reaction. Denouncing electoral illusions, he tirelessly advocated a united front, "the only way to ensure the mobilization of all those called upon to fight if they wish to live with dignity, freedom, and protection from abject poverty."

On a personal level, Gilbert was incredibly generous. Always ready to help his comrades, he readily lent a hand, deploying his talents as a highly skilled and creative bricklayer. Solidarity was not an empty word for him. He knew he was in exceptional physical health ("a real fellow"), and was for many years a national champion of pelota as well as a great table tennis enthusiast. Gilbert loved life, Italy, and the Revolution. Knowing his end was near, he told us, a few days before his death: "It has been my life; I will regret not having lived it."

Farewell, Comrade, farewell, noble heart .

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Memoirs

I was born on June 3, 1929, into a working-class family. My father was a miner, my mother a homemaker. I have a younger sister. Until the age of 12, I was a diligent student at the local primary school. For the first time, in 1941, I left my village. It was to enrol at the Athénée de Morlanwelz, guided by a cousin of my mother's who had completed his secondary education there. For me, it was quite an undertaking. It felt like a major journey. You'll understand if you know that Mont Sainte Aldegonde had never seen a train or tram pass through its territory. If you needed to travel, you couldn't expect to find a station or tram stop for more than 2 kilometres around. You needed strong legs to live where we came from. I know this well, having for four years walked the long way to school, all the way up to the plateau at the top of Morlanwelz. This meant I had to walk 10 km round trip every day. And that was in all kinds of weather.

I grew up in a small village from which it wasn't easy to escape. Generations succeeded one another comfortably, without fanfare, wary of extravagance. Surrounded by customs, people paid little attention to what was happening elsewhere. People rarely moved about, and likewise, ideas hardly progressed. This meant my childhood was steeped in the beliefs, prejudices, superstitions, and habits of the older generation. And these older people, in turn, relied on what they had received from their elders, who, by definition, held a monopoly on knowledge. Consequently, they allowed no critical thinking, especially from those "too young to speak." This explains why, lacking exchange, the evolution of thought never took root in the culture. There was one rule that one was obliged to accept: it has always been this way, and it will always be this way.

Imagine my astonishment when I first encountered this new and unfamiliar world that the Athénée offered me! Suddenly, everything had to be explained, understood, and evaluated. The lectures sparked frequent discussions, and our opinions were constantly sought. This appeal to reason was, for me, a revelation and a welcome liberation. The atmosphere it created undoubtedly provided me with one of the finest periods of my life. I wasn't fortunate enough to complete my secondary education. My enjoyment lasted only four years. One is forced to acknowledge the limitations imposed upon us. In a mining family, resources are scarce. You're given what is possible, but you mustn't ask for too much. You don't waste too much time studying. The essentials lie elsewhere, they say.

Work, take time...

It was therefore with a heavy heart that I left the Athénée. In those days, jobs were plentiful. I quickly returned to Boël . There, for three years, I calculated the wages of the workers in an entire division of the factory. It was also there that I received my first union membership card. The year was 1945. I was fortunate to be warmly welcomed by my colleagues and friends at the office. I must especially thank Jean Delamper, Jules Pourbaix , and Gaston Brigode, who did their best to guide the young man entrusted to their care in his early days. We got along very well.

This could probably have continued for a long time, if health problems hadn't brought my career as a wages clerk to an end. The numerous treatments I needed required several hospital stays, where I underwent multiple operations.

My 20th birthday arrived. Although I was still on sick leave, and despite the strict treatment prescribed, I couldn't avoid military service. So, on my birthday, I found myself in Germany. Initially, I participated in exercises with my mates, but after two weeks, I had to be hospitalized again, first in Soest, then in Antwerp, after returning to Belgium. Little by little, I finally recovered. The rest of my service consisted of nothing but foolishness and idiocy. That's all you can expect from the idiotic officers in charge of "instructing and educating" us. We waited patiently, and in the end, the class managed anyway.

Finally free, I'm eager to resume a normal life, but I'm giving up on returning to an office. I work for a few months in a hardware store.

I got married, and I also decided to go back to school. But this time, I had to take classes in the evenings, after work. I chose civil engineering. Construction and urban planning appealed to me and greatly interested me. To be consistent with this choice, I went to work on construction sites. Since I had no qualifications, I was hired as a labourer. This meant a very tough year, but one that proved to be invaluable training. I learned on the job how to become a bricklayer. As strange as it may seem, I, who wasn't initially a manual worker, found myself at 25 leading a team of about ten workers, of whom I was the oldest. From then on, we decided to go from one construction site to another as a group. We preferred to work for large companies, where it was possible to work in fully formed teams, with our established routines, methods, and work rhythm. We're getting our hands dirty by visiting the large cities that are springing up everywhere at the time. Then there will be schools, hospitals, a courthouse, a monastery, etc.

Political activity

From a very young age, I was interested in social issues. Furthermore, my introduction to politics began soon after I arrived at the Athénée. I was fortunate enough to have an extraordinary teacher, a veritable walking encyclopaedia. I'm referring to Gonzalès Decamps. He will always remain, in my eyes, one of the two most important people I've ever met. The second, who was for a long time his alter ego, is Ernest Mandel.

It must be said that, unlike Ernest, Gonzales wrote very little, which is a shame. But, like Ernest, he spoke with such ease, and with such clarity that he made his presentations accessible and captivating. Having known such men could not fail to leave a lasting impression.

It would be unfair not to include our friend and comrade Emile Van Ceulen. Emile, an indefatigable worker and unparalleled organizer, was perfect for bringing to practical use what his two companions suggested with their research and theoretical work.

It is also worth remembering that for many years, up until the early 1960s, he led the JGS ("Young Socialist Guard") He transformed this movement into an aedent and dynamic organization. Under his leadership, the JGS consistently and actively participated in all the struggles waged by the working class in the post-war period.

I would be remiss if I didn't also mention Robert Joly, an excellent Latin and French teacher. Unfortunately, I didn't know him as well as my other friends. Nevertheless, I will always remember him as a man of great worth and intellectual honesty. The kind of man you always want to be around.

How it began

In 1940, when the war broke out, I was eleven years old. When I met Gonzales, I was almost thirteen. At the Athenaeum, by chance, I ended up sitting on the same bench as a friend named...Evariste Perez. That name certainly intrigued me. He told me he was Spanish and that his brother José was in the class after ours. The Perez family fled fascism at the end of the fighting against Franco. They found refuge in Morlanwelz.

Answering my questions, Evariste quickly began telling me about the war in Spain. This was, in fact, the first event that had caught my attention a few years earlier. It was what prompted me to read the newspapers to follow the unfolding events. The accounts were often accompanied by photographs. I will never forget the one showing the aftermath of the horrific bombing of Guernica. I must add another fact that explains my lifelong interest in the Spanish tragedy. Raymond Falise, a friend of my family, participated in it. He went there and joined the International Brigades. He was wounded twice. He wrote to us quite often. Upon his return, he was always generous with details about what he had experienced in Spain. I could not, of course, remain unmoved by all of this. And now that I had Evariste by my side, and imagining that he had witnessed these tragedies, you can understand the importance he held in my eyes. I couldn't help but become attached to him. Two years older than me, he no longer acted like a child. He had already read a great deal, much more than I, in any case. Since I have no interest in trivialities, we soon only had "serious" conversations.

The war had descended upon us and seemed destined to drag on. We found ourselves in a more and more deprived situation. We cursed the presence of the Germans, whom we held responsible for the harsh conditions we witnessed. But above all, we were determined to find those responsible for our predicament. We did not accept this situation, but we were forced to endure it. Evariste, it should be remembered, was my elder. He found it quite easy to steer our frequent discussions in the direction that suited him best. I, a young rebel just beginning to awaken, missed no opportunity to learn. I was eager to be able to identify those whom we would have to hold accountable when the time came.

I was always amazed by the breadth of knowledge my companion displayed. In fact, he drew from a source I hadn't yet suspected but would eventually discover. Indeed, I was soon invited to visit the Perez family. And it was there that I had the opportunity to meet Gonzales in a different capacity than as a professor. A true socialist activist, Gonzales wanted to help all the Spanish families who had ended up in Morlanwelz. He visited the Perez family almost every day. He even lived just a stone's throw away.

After that, I visited my friends at least once a week, and my meetings with Gonzales increased accordingly. We got to know each other better. As these meetings progressed, the conversations inevitably evolved, and Gonzales eventually became more than just a teacher to me. The ongoing war was becoming increasingly unbearable, leading us to acknowledge very different aspirations. That's how I came to be integrated into a rather unusual team. Initially, I was only asked to act as a liaison with a comrade from Leval . It mainly involved transferring documents in both directions. At this stage, I didn't know this comrade. I knew nothing about him, and it was agreed that it was best to keep it that way. During the war, the less you know, the better. Any possibility of leaks had to be avoided. We didn't talk, or if we did, it was only when absolutely certain of the person we were dealing with. Think about it: a word spoken carelessly or one that went beyond what was meant can lead to a dreaded arrest. That's how a life of activism can begin. I was almost 14.

In fact, my first contact was none other than Victor Bougard . I would soon learn much more about him. Because, depending on the circumstances, it sometimes happens that an entire system of precautions becomes useless. Victor, a coal miner, had been chosen as a union representative by his fellow workers. Then, suddenly, they decided to stop working. They no longer wanted to tolerate the abuses imposed by the mine management. Fully aware of the danger involved, Victor agreed to lead a strike in the midst of war. This took place at the Anderlues coal mine. Taken to the commandatur in Charleroi, Victor had to answer for his conduct and the responsibilities he had assumed. He presented such convincing arguments to the Germans that, thanks also to several testimonies, he managed to shift the blame for the conflict onto the management. It was the management that ultimately faced punishment, while the

workers won their case. It was a matter of supplies that should have gone to the workers, but which the managers wanted to monopolize for their own benefit.

The scare was close. Several men had narrowly escaped the concentration camps. After that, there was no more playing hide-and-seek between Victor and me. I knew enough. I also learned that Victor was from Morlanwelz, where he had spent his youth in the JGS, alongside Gonzales, which explained their close bond. These are the kinds of experiences we had to endure for five years. But that wasn't all. We lacked everything: clothes, shoes, and worst of all, there was this gnawing hunger. We didn't have enough to eat; the Germans gave us meagre rations. And we were constantly on edge. We feared the frequent bombings or the settling of scores between partisans and the occupying troops or collaborators.

It's a very harsh school of life. What TV shows us about Palestine, Africa, or Latin America shouldn't surprise us. We saw similar things back home between 1940 and 1945. We had to hide to protect ourselves from gunfire. And one day, I was stopped dead in my tracks, with a rifle barrel pointed at my back. Whatever your state of mind, at a moment like that, you're not feeling very confident. Believe me, it's chilling... down your spine, actually. Another time, people were being arrested. They were being forced into trucks with rifle butts, and blows were being landed wherever they felt they could. And yet, despite the hardships, we sometimes shared our bread with Jewish children.

As strange as it may seem, several Jewish families were able to spend the war with us. They had fled Antwerp, where the persecution was relentless, and had come to Mont Sainte Aldegonde to take refuge. These people lived there, protected thanks to the complicity of kind neighbours. Living constantly in fear, not officially "existing," they had very little income. They also didn't have ration cards. Without a card, you couldn't get anything except on the black market. Imagine the difficulties they faced. In each of the families, there were children. These children lived with us, played with us, went to school with us, and everything else is easily understood.

Liberation at last

Everything comes to an end. Even wars eventually end. We still lack everything, but at least we can speak freely. We don't hold back now that we're breathing the air of freedom. In our minds, what we endured for five years will never happen again. That's our credo, and it's with this idea in mind that we want to live our lives. With the young friends I hang out with, the only thing we talk about is settling scores with the capitalist society that we hold responsible for the suffering endured by the people of Europe and the world.

For my part, I decided without delay to re-establish a section of the Young Socialist Guard in Mont Sainte Aldegonde . I became its secretary. I was fifteen years old at the time. I asked one of my former teachers to take over as president. It was Max Michotte, who accepted without hesitation. During the few years he remained with us, he fulfilled his role perfectly. He finally left us to go, with his wife, also a teacher, to take over the management of an orphanage.

Political education is our constant concern, Marxism our guiding principle. For me personally, my commitment becomes even more serious, alongside Evariste Perez. We regularly join two comrades from Charleroi, including Florent Gallois, to travel to the Borinage region, most often. There, we sell *La Lutte Ouvrière* ("Workers' Struggle") or pamphlets from the Fourth International , either by street sales or going door-to-door.

To organize our activism, Gonzales remained our guide. Now, a few more young people have decided to join him and regularly participate in educational sessions under his direction. Gonzales doesn't like us lingering too long in youth movements. He wants us to stay only long enough to prepare the next generation. He urges us to make our

voices heard at higher levels, to take part in debates at union meetings, in particular. But soon, we will be called upon to speak out about problems facing our organization. The wave of enthusiasm that the end of hostilities had generated is increasingly giving way to a disillusionment that threatens to spread dangerously. It is becoming urgent to react and not let the momentum that the workers had shown in expressing the hopes they had conceived dissipate.

Within the organization, from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, a major debate held considerable attention. The issue was whether or not to adopt a tactic that would lead us to practice entryism in the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB). We knew that our forces were clearly insufficient. They would not allow us to have a decisive impact on the workers' movement. For our national leaders, this justified the proposed solution. Those in favour of this idea also argued that the PSB assemblies still attracted the majority of active workers. They hoped that once integrated, we would be better positioned and also skilled enough to create a network that should be as large and consistent as possible. We must target the best members, those capable of paying close attention to the slogans of our programme: a sliding scale of wages, a single pension, workers' control, nationalizations, and so on. A majority agreed to join the PSB and work there effectively, but a significant portion of our comrades did not. They therefore separated themselves from us. Some even caused us great harm in later periods, and this continues to this day.

Working-class offensive

In Liège, especially in the research offices of the General Federation of Belgian Labour (FGTB) people are realizing that the coal mines are increasingly threatened. Similarly, the future of the steel industry is no more secure. A rather bleak outlook is predicted. It is essential and urgent to develop a radical alternative to the current policies.

Under the signature of André Renard, the report "Holdings and Economic Democracy" was presented. It was discussed and adopted for the first time at an extraordinary Congress in 1954. Noting the dangerous obsolescence of the production system in Wallonia, this study advocated a profound restructuring. It called for significant investments in sectors requiring ever-increasing skill levels and capable of generating high levels of added value. This would represent a break from the prevailing tradition in Belgian economic and industrial circles, which had always focused on bringing raw or semi-finished products to market. This project was to be based on nationalizations, particularly of the energy sector, and above all of the coal mines, whose existence was prolonged through subsidies; but also of the financial sector, including banks and insurance companies. An important element intended to secure widespread support for the project was the proposed establishment of a National Health Service, free for all.

This set of ideas was revisited at another extraordinary congress in 1956. The report was adopted once again. An important consequence of these repeated congresses was that the discussion had been able to deepen. The working class had been able to absorb the ideas contained in the proposed alternative. From then on, in the assemblies, this report was the only topic of discussion. It was called the Programme for Structural Reforms, with its anti-capitalist character, which we on the left were quick to emphasize.

It was precisely in 1957 that the newspaper *La Gauche* ("The Left") appeared, its primary objective being to fight for the implementation of the famous Structural Reform Programme. This newspaper was sponsored by Camille Huysmans, a veteran Marxist activist within the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB), and by André Renard, an emblematic figure of the FGTB. Militant activity intensified considerably. We had time to establish ourselves within the Socialist Party sections and attract the most insightful and combative members. Together, we led a very active faction that was resolutely moving to the left.

This was so true that in 1958, when the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB) held its national congress, it was the Left that carried the day, much to the astonishment of the national leadership. André Genot, through a remarkable intervention, managed to secure a strong majority to pass a motion based on a programme undeniably reminiscent of that of the FGTB. It was then decided to organize a campaign of public awareness to further popularize the various points of the programme and, above all, their significance. Increasingly heated debates took place in numerous municipalities. Each time, there were at least two speakers: one speaking on behalf of the PSB, the other representing the FGTB. The tone of the speeches steadily grew more intense, amply demonstrating the workers' determination.

There's trouble in the ranks

One fact deserves to be reported concerning the holding and especially the outcome of the Congress which was held on this occasion in the district of Thuin.

It is worth noting that the Socialist Party had been relegated to the opposition. This forced its leaders to adopt a more modest approach. They had been dismissed, and figures like Van Acker and company seemed to have fallen out of favour. Consequently, the traditional intellectual elite had lost their prestige and a good deal of their authority. They could hardly find and use compelling arguments that would have allowed them to decisively counter the tenacity of the rank and file. Faced with the offensive being prepared by the bourgeoisie, these members were determined to stand their ground. They wanted to confront the class enemy and ultimately impose the alternative already popularized by the Left, thus following the positions defended by the FGTB in 1954 and 1956.

It was this state of mind that had to prevail from now on, and which led us to fight with such intransigence, especially at the Congress held by the Federation of Thuin in this year 1959. We, this means above all those who put themselves forward the most, namely Raymond Saublains with his section of Haine Saint Pierre, Robert Joly for Carnières, the metalworkers from Ham sur Heure, and the section of Leval on whose behalf I spoke.

After a long evening of heated debates which had a large echo, we managed to convince all the other sections of the district. Despite a few attempts to calm things down, the Federal Committee had no choice but to record the outcome of the discussions, even in the presence of Max Buset, the national president. This was all the more sensational given that, in the past, the President had never allowed any spirit of dissent to emerge, let alone gain traction, within "his party." As expected, the outcome of this meeting was to lead to a motion to be presented at the upcoming National Congress. The still-tense atmosphere made it difficult to draft the text properly. It was therefore decided that a committee, including the main participants, should meet in a calm setting. And so, that evening, Max Buset, the National President of the PSB, was seen writing out by hand the motion that Raymond Saublains and I had dictated to him.

This is how the Socialist Federation of Thuin adopted a programme of struggle incorporating all the ideas which were to appear later in what was called the famous Programme of Structural Reforms, to which we wanted to give a distinctly anti-capitalist character.

In view of what has just been reported, is there still a need to insist on demonstrating the importance that we, the Left, had managed to maintain within the PSB?

People are getting their weapons ready, on

both sides

There can be no doubt about it. The spirit that animates the working class is leading it firmly on the offensive. We are perfectly aware, at the same time, that on the other side of the barricade, the bourgeoisie also has its ideas, but that it does not pursue the objectives that suit us. The bourgeoisie won the last elections. It reigns supreme in the government.

Better than anyone, it knows the outdated state of its industrial sectors. It knows it cannot avoid renewing its production equipment, often worn beyond repair. But unlike us, it doesn't want to pay for the necessary investments itself. It wants to shift the burden onto the taxpayers, that is to say, onto the working class.

Its prime minister, Gaston Eyskens, therefore drafted a bill for this purpose. His intention was nothing less than to erode the social gains that employers had been forced to grant at the end of the war. Targeting all sectors at once, Eyskens called his law the "Single Law." There is little need to go into the details of this law; what we have suffered since then speaks for itself. It is easy to understand that the viewpoints are irreconcilable. The struggle is inevitable.

From the moment the bill was debated in parliament, the workers' response was immediate: a strike. Among the very first to strike were the dockworkers of Antwerp and Ghent. They attempted, with varying degrees of success, to extend the movement to Flanders. Throughout the Walloon industrial region, the strike began spontaneously and spread like wildfire. Everything ground to a halt in the blink of an eye: factories, coal mines, trains, trams, department stores, and so on. The Maisons du Peuple ("People's Houses") were immediately flooded with strikers seeking slogans and instructions. Strike committees, emerging from the rank and file, sprang up everywhere. Our aim was to conduct the movement seriously and effectively. Every morning, there was an assembly to organize picket lines, if needed. Then the discussions resumed, guided by the committee. Everything that had already fuelled the preparatory debates for the congresses of 54 and 56 is taken up again.

The demands we are maintaining:

- 1. Withdrawal without discussion of the projected Single Law
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- 2. Adoption of an alternative by imposing the Structural Reform Program.me
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This explains the great momentum shown in the working class.

Here in Leval, the strike committee is operating continuously. And it's no exaggeration to say that I'm playing a leading role in directing the movement.

For our region, the real headquarters of the strike is located at the Maison du Peuple in La Louvière. Quite simply, because we've long since established our JGS and Left Regional Committee there. We feel at home there, we can work comfortably, without restraint, and develop the necessary plans. On the other hand, at Jolimont, the FGTB headquarters, it's easy to sense that certain leaders are absolutely opposed to the movement expanding. Their vision is completely at odds with that of the rank and file, who want the Structural Reform Programme adopted. This explains why certain grassroots committees have become so influential.

Strange doings in Binche

While everywhere else in the region the declaration of a strike against the Single Law was a given, we expected to encounter some difficulties in Binche, still perceived in the surrounding villages as "Catholic Binche." At that time, very large numbers of people —several thousand— of both sexes still went there every day. They came to work, mainly in the sewing workshops. All these establishments were run in an almost military fashion by old families, each more reactionary than the next one. Some, moreover, had to answer for suspicious actions or behaviour during the war. We knew they would not hesitate to call on the constabulary to restore order in "their town." That is why the activists from the surrounding villages consulted with one another and brought together as many determined men as they could to impose their point of view. The strikers came in such large numbers to occupy the town centre that the detachment of gendarmes sent there was clearly no match for them. In such an atmosphere, it was enough to remind everyone of the spirit of solidarity that should unite all workers for a work stoppage to be decided fairly quickly in the main establishments. This led others to follow suit. The remaining task was to ensure that the movement would become firmly established, sustainable, and able to grow as needed. It was to discuss how to organize that a large number of people gathered at the Maison du Peuple (People's House). To the comrades in Binche whom I know, I suggested doing as we did in Leval : creating a Strike Committee, which should be made up of serious individuals, chosen by the rank and file. This they agreed to.

Taking advantage of the presence of such a large and determined-looking group, a general assembly was organized to choose those responsible for the upcoming operations. Up to that point, a few of us from Levallois had stayed behind. But, since we weren't from Binche, we didn't have any say in the decisions to be made here. We wanted to leave, especially since an assembly awaited us at the Maison du Peuple in Leval . But then, we were kept there, and me in particular. The reason was that, at this point, we had to address all these people who were waiting for more information and instructions about what would happen next. We had to find the right words to motivate them. It was a matter of talking to them, yes, but what should we say? "Only you can do that," I was told!

Those who said that clearly still remembered the content of all my interventions during the debates at the Socialist Party Congresses in the Thuin Federation. So, none of the PSB officials present here were capable of addressing workers in struggle! Yet there are people among us who consider themselves important and who sit on the Party's Federal Committee. Like, for example, J. Gaillard, the president. Or G. Richard. And the latter is doubly at fault because, besides his Party membership, he is also, and above all, the union representative supposed to guide his members in the sewing workshops throughout the Central Region. Without any shame, he begs me to stay. There is also Yvonne Prince, a Socialist member of parliament, but she must be considered differently. Yvonne could have done it. Addressing a large and noisy crowd properly is something she has already done, in other circumstances. But, rather exasperated by these two carnival show-offs, she told me that, if I was willing to accept it, it was up to me to address the strikers. She agreed to chair the meeting, but she let me describe the situation and present the alternative we were proposing with the Left. This, incidentally, left its mark when it came time to draw up the lists of candidates for the elections following the strike.

What outcome can we hope for?

As the days go by, this is the question that keeps coming up. The entire Walloon industrial sector has joined the struggle with the expected enthusiasm. But even the most profound movement cannot last and continue without progress. To go beyond what this mobilization has achieved, it's a matter of challenging the established order, moving towards a situation of dual power. This has existed in embryonic form in some places. The next step, in the eyes of those most aware, is to repeat the operation that put an end to the Royal Affair in 1950: organize a march on Brussels without delay. This would undoubtedly be the decisive way to force a decision in our favour. A massive rush to the capital would bring down the government and force the withdrawal of the Single Law that was passed in the meantime. We would then seize the opportunity to implement our alternative: the Structural Reform Programme. It is clear that this requires a very deep commitment to the confrontation. And that is precisely what André Renard lacks the courage to undertake. He is not revolutionary enough for that.

Large gathering in L Louvière

André Renard finally arrived in the city centre, answering the urgent call of the strikers. Men and women flocked to La Louvière from all the surrounding towns and villages. The Place Mansart was too small to hold the more than 40,000 people, who overflowed into the surrounding streets. The crowd swore by Renard, the messiah who would lead them to victory. A roar of joy and satisfaction greeted his appearance on the balcony of the Maison du Peuple. He began to harangue in his powerful voice the excited people, who greeted each fragment of his speech with frequent applause. The audience made clear its wishes, hoping to hear them echoed and approved. From all directions, calls arose and thundered: "March on Brussels... Everyone to Brussels, let's overthrow Eyskens!"

But Renard is doing everything he can to avoid listening. He has a completely different line of reasoning in mind, which he wants to develop. To justify his approach, he initially uses the pretext that Flanders did not join the strike with the same unanimity as Wallonia. And here, he can put forward an important argument that comes to his aid. Indeed, he points out that Louis Major, General Secretary of the FGTB, always refused to call for a general strike. He particularly emphasizes that Major is from Antwerp, therefore Flemish. He then adds that, in the history of social struggles, Flanders has eternally played the role of obstacle, or worse, often behaves as an adversary of Walloon aspirations. And, on top of that, he judges it too quick to obey the clergy first. That's the last straw.

He concludes that, for us, it is time to realize the importance of looking after our interests as Walloons, given the unreliability shown by the Flemish. They, moreover, vote mainly for the right wing, unlike us, he added. Forced as we are to do without the Flemish in these struggles, what must be on the agenda in such a situation is the creation of a Walloon People's Movement (MPW), and also to demand Federalism. He asserted that this alone will give us the means to determine, for ourselves, the paths favourable to our destiny.

It's unbelievable. We've never heard anything like it from a union leader, especially a socialist one. Needless to say, those in the know understand that Renard is refusing to take responsibility for organizing the March on Brussels. His primary fear is of unrest he wouldn't be able to control. Consequently, particularly with the newspaper *Combat* he launched, he's been issuing a barrage of new directives, turning his back on the Left, which defends different viewpoints, more in line with the reality on the ground. By his actions, Renard has made himself responsible for widening the divide between Walloon and Flemish workers, a divide that others will undoubtedly exploit.

We will soon realize that, after having aroused so much hope, the great strike will be diverted onto a dead end, the MPW, which will be left to die a natural death a little later.

Meanwhile, at the PSB

Meanwhile, within the Socialist Party, efforts were underway to defuse the situation. Léo Collard, Spaak, and Van Acker suggested to Eyskens that they find a compromise to end the conflict. Ultimately, the manoeuvres of both Renard and the PSB leadership disoriented the strikers, especially in Flanders, where workers felt abandoned by the Walloon FGTB. And, above all, there was suspicion that the Socialist leaders were using the strikers, whom they believed needed to be brought back into line, as a bargaining chip for a future government position.

The initial momentum was broken, first among the Flemish, where the movement began to falter on January 7th. On January 10th, the FGTB ordered metalworkers in Bruges and tram drivers in Ghent to return to work; all this despite demonstrations that drew 20,000 participants in Antwerp and 13,000 in Ghent. It became increasingly clear that both the leadership of the FGTB and that of the PSB (Belgian Socialist Party) were eager to put an end to this conflict, which they had not wanted but which had taken them by surprise.

After a month of fierce struggle, on January 24th, 120,000 metalworkers from the Liège and Charleroi coalfields finally voted to return to work. The bargaining had resulted in Eyskens' resignation. However, the Single Law remained in effect. With Eyskens' resignation, it was proclaimed that the strike had ended in a great victory. The workers were eager to believe it, still riding the high of the experience they had just had. Subsequent events would prove otherwise.

Nevertheless, at that moment, the workers were aware that they had fought a great battle. They saw nothing to reproach themselves for; they were not at fault. Convinced they had fully done their duty, most returned to work filled with a sense of pride that no one dared to hide. This was so true that in some places, like among the railway workers in Haine Saint Pierre or the tram workers in Anderlues, the return to work took place in close ranks, behind local brass bands, with a red flag at the head and to the sound of the Internationale. Morale was still high, and they wanted to show it.

Back to work

The vote by the metalworkers of Liège and Charleroi on January 24th signalled the end of hostilities. Work would therefore resume in the following days. Inevitably, fatigue had set in for some of the strikers. Yet, they reluctantly agreed to return to work. Considering the scale of the struggle they had waged, and the manner in which it ended, a sense of incompleteness pervaded the workers' ranks. Many felt that it would have taken very little for the outcome to have definitively swung in their favour.

In fact, all that was lacking was decisive leadership. The rank and file were ready. Indeed, they spontaneously rose up in most sectors. However, too many union leaders were conspicuously absent where they were expected. Similarly, elected officials were not very proactive either. Renard and his faction certainly put themselves forward, but in doing so, they revealed the limits of their commitment. In fact, it all culminated in Eyskens' resignation. But this time, the union leaders, along with the Socialist parliamentarians, were quick to exaggerate the result, hailing it as a great victory and flattering the workers more than was appropriate. For the Socialist elected officials, the time had come to reappear in a spectacular fashion, after having been so discreet before.

With the government having fallen following Eyskens's resignation, new elections are on the horizon. They will take place sometime in April. This is what has become important for them. The same commotion is shaking up their adversaries as well; it's all hands on deck. As for us, we are primarily interested in what is happening within the PSB. We will see that, recently, the Left has left its mark.

In February, the Socialist Party Federation of Thudinie convened a congress. The topic was preparation for the upcoming elections, and the main task was to finalize the candidate lists. The spirit of the strike quickly permeated the lively discussions. A large number of workers who had participated in the conflict filled the hall of the People's House in Lobbes. In the tense atmosphere, I was quickly taken aback by a proposal that directly concerned me. The attendees wanted the position put forward by the strikers, and therefore essentially by the Left, to be included in the electoral programme. Furthermore, they only wanted to entrust the nominations to those who had proven most capable of fighting for the Structural Reform Programme. And, to my great surprise, my name was the first to be mentioned for the list to be presented for the Chamber of Deputies. I hadn't expected anything like it.

To my close friends, I would like to say that I am completely unprepared for this. But they advise me to remain silent, to be mindful of the atmosphere in the room, as well as the difficulty of going against the vox populi. Those who listened to us and followed us through the toughest moments of the strike would not accept a retreat today. There can be no question of disappointing them, those who see only one thing: to continue and move forward. We have a

programme to implement, and it is with that in mind that we are proceeding.

So they want me to be their spokesperson in parliament. I decide to let them talk and let them do their thing. But I know there's still a reason why my candidacy isn't being considered. Let's review the usual criteria. To be considered a valid candidate, one must meet certain conditions, which are:

- to be a member of the party for at least 5 years.
-
- to have been a reader of the party's press for at least 5 years.
-
- to be a member of the Socialist Mutual Society for at least 5 years
-
- to be a member of the FGTB for at least 5 years
-
- to be a member of the Socialist Cooperative for at least 5 years, and to be a customer of it up to a certain amount.
-

I can fulfil the requirements for the first four items. However, I cannot do so regarding the Cooperative. I do not have receipts for the amounts requested.

Out of an abundance of caution, I finally explained my situation clearly, believing that the question of my candidacy would then be off the table. However, the ensuing storm in the assembly proved my mistake. The Federal Committee feared the atmosphere would deteriorate. But it couldn't make a decision immediately, especially since two other candidacies had unexpectedly emerged. It proposed that everything be calmly examined over the following week and that a new congress be convened, at the end of which everything would be definitively decided. This was ultimately accepted.

Then came the second congress. Unanimity quickly prevailed in imposing my candidacy, and the Federal Committee no longer wanted to face a highly agitated membership. Meanwhile, the two other candidates were rejected. They could not demonstrate exemplary conduct during the strike, far from it, which was the criticism levelled against them. This time, opportunism did not pay off.

Thus, in the Thuin district, no one objected to my name appearing on the Socialist list. This is largely the result of interventions by large local branches that distinguished themselves by wholeheartedly supporting me. They, in turn, influenced others. This is the case in Leval, of course, where I am the usual spokesperson. It's the same for the Haine Saint Pierre branch, where my close comrade Raymond Saublains became president and led its members "full speed to the left." And then there's Carnières, where I was active for several years. Robert Joly, my former teacher, who became my friend, also became president there while keeping the party on the right track. Let's also remember Ham Sur Heure, whose representatives spared no effort throughout the period we have just experienced.

On the one hand, I must admit that this behaviour is very flattering. But the most important, and most reassuring, thing is to see unequivocal positions prevailing in meetings. We have just taken a significant step in our lives as activists. Nevertheless, I am very embarrassed by what is being proposed to me. They want me to be a member of parliament, but they fail to consider that our Leval branch already has a member of parliament, a female member: Yvonne Prince. I would never allow myself to forget her.

To be fair, we cannot ignore the fact that Yvonne stood by our side throughout the entire struggle we waged, without wavering. From the very beginning, she asked to be admitted to the strike committee. There, she behaved with utmost loyalty, just like everyone else. Highly disciplined, she never spoke before her turn, nor without asking for permission. She never tried to draw attention to herself. The strikers were in charge of the committee; she simply

joined us, nothing more, never claiming any special status. However, she never failed to be present at the picket lines where needed. The same cannot be said of everyone. Of all the representatives in Leval, she is truly the only one who has not fallen short in any way. It should be noted that in Leval, four of its representatives still hold their comfortable positions in Jolimont, in the offices of the FGTB. One of them even sits on the National Presidency of the Miners' Union—imagine that! Well, let it be known: throughout the entire strike, none of these "comrades" showed their faces to the striking workers. It's a disgrace. Their sinecures are enough for them. The common folk aren't worth mingling with, no doubt. So, considering all this, how could anyone expect me to fight against Yvonne, who has done nothing wrong? I can't conduct personal propaganda that could harm her. I'd be happy to be her deputy, without trying to supplant her. I'll be by her side, not in front.

Another question often makes me uneasy. Consider this: most of the time, I feel caught between two stools. Being a member of the PSB while also belonging to the Fourth International isn't always easy to manage. Sometimes, the viewpoints are so different.

The PSB in power

The elections brought no major changes, apart from a slight shift to the left in some areas. There was no major defeat for the bourgeoisie, nor any great victory for the workers' parties. Among them, the atmosphere remains turbulent. It remains difficult to bring those who have remained vigilant back into line. Employers sense that this will take time.

For their part, the Socialist leaders expect recognition for having so skilfully channelled the workers' momentum and stemmed the tide of the crisis. They will receive their reward. They will take the Liberals' place alongside the Social Christians (PSC) in the government. This, at least, is the agreement reached between the representatives of the two groups. But obtaining the approval of the various Socialist sections will prove very difficult in some places. In certain Walloon districts, many members reject this alliance. They did not fight so fiercely against the bourgeoisie only to see their representatives ultimately cozy up to them. The exchanges are very heated throughout the Socialist Party. It will take all the talent of Spaak, Van Acker, Collard, and their associates to achieve what they aspire to: gaining power. The leading Socialists will truly do everything they can and will eventually come up with an argument that will allow them to secure a majority: they assure everyone that their participation in the government will guarantee that the Single Law, although passed, will never be implemented. In fact, as we shall see, it will not be implemented immediately, nor all at once. It will be done in stages, bit by bit. The bourgeoisie knows how to take its time when necessary.

This resulted in a government formed by the PSC's Théo Lefèvre as Prime Minister, accompanied by the Socialist Spaak as Deputy Prime Minister. Disillusionment was widespread among many members of the Socialist Party, but this came as no surprise to the more politically aware. Nevertheless, many refused to accept that their struggle had been sold off so cheaply. For them, the alternative to the Single Law—structural reforms—was their response. It was precisely here that André Renard proved more astute, perceiving popular aspirations better than others, unlike the Socialist leaders. He pushed as hard as he could for the development of the MPW (Movement for a Popular Movement in Wallonia). With this movement, he advocated for federalism, while also emphasizing the need for the structural reforms so effectively promoted during the strike.

People are joining the MPW en masse. At the same time, the Socialist Party is seeing large gaps open up in its ranks. The enthusiasm in one direction is matched by desertion in the other. Thus, in Carnières, led by its President Robert Joly, the entire Socialist Party section joins the MPW en masse. And elsewhere, similar trends are occurring. This is evident when André Renard calls for a demonstration in Liège. The MPW sections of Carnières, like that of Leval, attend, each accompanied by the socialist brass band of their respective municipality. This shows that the

working class does not feel defeated. It simply believes that a better opportunity will present itself, one that will finally allow it to prevail for good.

The facts remain the same: on one side, the bourgeoisie wants to maintain and increase its profits, while on the other, the working class wants to preserve and improve its social gains. Seeing the eagerness with which workers respond to the call, one can't help but think that if the MPW were to run in the elections, it would cause a landslide victory. But that's not what André Renard envisions. For him, the MPW must remain a pressure movement on the traditional parties, and especially on the PSB.

Raction is coming in a sly way

The PSC was quick to remind the Socialists of a commitment they had to make as the price of the minor positions they currently held. What they were demanding showed how much the owners of capital had feared the determination of the workers in struggle. They still trembled at the memory of the almost insurrectionary methods used in some places. They wanted to ensure that this never happened again. They demanded that measures be taken to protect against any possibility of a recurrence of certain tactics. They proposed a bill on maintaining public order and counted on the Socialists' support to pass it. They believed that significant increases should be granted to the budgets of the army and the gendarmerie, and demanded that the latter be equipped with light armoured vehicles. Such a proposal was immediately perceived and denounced as an anti-strike plan deemed unacceptable by the workers' movement. The Left, of course, took the lead in fighting this scandalous and provocative proposal.

It has been a long time since Socialist Party meetings have seen debates as lively and heated as those sparked by this anti-strike proposal. Following often stormy discussions, wherever the Left has managed to gain a foothold, emissaries from the National Bureau are rebuffed without restraint. This is regularly the case in the Leval and Haine Saint Pierre sections, and also in Carnières, where there is no hesitation in demanding the resignation of the Socialist ministers. But it will soon become clear that the leadership of the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB) has chosen its side. It will help the wealthy financiers to restore and consolidate the bourgeois order. It will manoeuvre as much as necessary to impose its point of view. Systematic division will henceforth be commonplace. Some will be flattered and favoured, while the harshest criticisms will be levelled at others, and lies will be told shamelessly, if necessary.

For example, to undermine their opponents at their core, the Socialist leaders pretend to draw from the Structural Reform Programme, hoping to put the Left in a difficult position. They promise free healthcare, but only for certain categories of people. They primarily target pensioners, and add widows, the disabled, and orphans. Thus comes the VIPO (Validation of Professional Interests) system. It takes a real will to miss the difference with what we expect. The Left is demanding nothing more than a free National Health Service for ALL. You can see the mistake. By acting this way, our esteemed ministers are simply forgetting all those who work in every sector. Most of these citizens have families to support, children to raise, or children in school. Quite simply, the vast majority of people in this country are not being taken into consideration.

However, by making such a proposal, they know they will impress a large number of older people who have often lost the habit of thinking things through. They are easily satisfied. That said, it's worth remembering that almost everywhere, provided they are affiliated with the socialist pensioners' association, older people are automatically considered full members of the party. In many local branches, it is with their votes that leaders secure majorities. And the system works almost every time. A bit of flattery, a promise to the pensioners, and the trick is done. Whenever necessary, this is how things are done in the Socialist Party.

Conclusion: pensioners therefore receive their VIPO. We will see that this is a sham. Whatever the self-righteous

preachers may have said, and despite their promises, there has never been free medicine or healthcare for anyone. Furthermore, it should be noted that to be recognized as VIPO, one can only receive a pittance of a pension, or have to live on a meagre income. Ultimately, and this applies to everyone, young and old, regarding the cost of healthcare, we can now assess how the issue is evolving. We are far from the free healthcare we were discussing. History is truly taking a turn for the worse. It is high time to get back on track.

It is hardly surprising to see the increasingly blatant desertion from the ranks of the Socialist Party. As already mentioned, the bulk of the activists, filled with bitterness and resentment, continue to turn to the MPW. These comrades are convinced that it is from there that they can fight most effectively for a programme much more in line with the needs so often expressed. The will, as we have seen, is not lacking and is commensurate with the hopes for a better future. Alas, there too, after a promising start, a disastrous twist of fate will dampen their enthusiasm. Against all expectations, André Renard dies prematurely, leaving his lieutenants distraught. Deprived of their leader, Genot and Latin are not up to the task of leading the MPW.

Fate has brought an end to an epic journey begun with such enthusiasm. The MPW has died a natural death for lack of capable and sufficiently committed leaders. After the disillusionment and disappointments experienced within the Socialist Party, this new blow has caused profound dismay. The effects will soon be felt.

The reflux.

Except in a few sections where the Left has managed to establish a significant presence, the rest of the Socialist Party is seeing a large number of its activists overcome by weariness. Defections from assemblies are becoming more frequent. Only the most committed remain at the forefront of the struggle. But in many places, their numbers are dwindling, and they often find themselves in the minority. To accelerate this trend, the party's "officials" invariably rely on majorities made up of pensioners, supplemented by all the "established" members in the various branches: the cooperative, the mutual insurance company, the union, and the municipal services. For all those who, during the initial surge of activity, and especially during the strike, had disappeared and vanished into thin air, are now re-emerging onto the political scene. They are speaking out again. Unfortunately, they only use it to serve the "bigwigs" to whom they owe obedience in exchange for the sinecures granted to them. Thus, within the Party, all those who personally have something to defend soon band together against the troublemakers, the spoilsports, against all those who dare to question too many things for their liking. Soon comes the signal for a veritable witch hunt where all means are justified to eliminate any troublesome opposition. The national leaders methodically regain the upper hand and are determined to restore order within the Party ranks.

This culminated in a congress held in December 1964. At its conclusion, after heated debates, it was decided that membership in the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB) would henceforth be incompatible with membership in La Gauche or any activity within the Movement for a Popular Movement (MPW). The split was thus finalized. In one fell swoop, the PSB lost more than 25 per cent of its most valuable and determined members. This disaffection would only continue to grow thereafter.

As far as we are concerned, our aim will be to try to bring together the best elements that the Left has attracted and that have emerged during the period we have just gone through. All our efforts are directed towards this goal. These initiatives are multiplying throughout the country. Finally, the Socialist Confederation of Workers (CST) is being formed. It brings together the Walloon Workers' Party (PWT), the Brussels Union of the Socialist Left (UGS), and the Socialistische Beweging Flanders (SBV).

Nevertheless, the Left has suffered significant setbacks. This is all the more damaging when it concerns those it

helped to rise to prominence, who now hesitate to commit fully. Thus, through a lack of boldness, determination, or conviction, figures like Cools, Gline, and Hurez remain in the PSB, causing widespread disillusionment. Worse still, they will even become ministers in various coalition governments, drawing many PSB voters with them in the subsequent elections.

This partly explains why, in alliance with the Communist Party, the Left, which had inspired so much hope in previous years, was rewarded with only two elected representatives. We are referring to Pierre Legrève in Brussels and François Perrin in Liège. It should be noted, however, that we narrowly missed having a representative in La Louvière, in the person of Jean Rombeaux. Elsewhere, there is total disillusionment. Discouragement is creeping in and intensifying among the workers who, moreover, are witnessing the deterioration and even, in some cases, the disappearance of the industrial fabric of the entire Walloon Region.

For its part, management is not remaining inactive. Circumstances are once again turning in its favour, and it intends to take full advantage. It misses no opportunity to intensify its pressure on its workers. It is about to launch its first offensive. Seizing a pretext, Cockerill's management does not hesitate to dismiss, all at once, seven of the most militant union representatives. This act, which would have seemed insane and even unthinkable a few years ago, does not provoke an adequate response, even among the workers of Liège. They, not so long ago, were still cited as the most determined vanguard of the Belgian proletariat. This is indicative of the lack of trust that has crept into the workers' lives. The Socialist Party, in government, loyally continues its task of promoting common sense and discipline within the working class. For its part, the FGTB is sticking as close as it can to the Socialist Party so as not to disappoint its ministerial friends in the "sister party." A new era of class collaboration is taking hold under the aegis of "responsible leaders".

The bourgeoisie is eager to launch the operation that will allow it to recoup everything it had to concede in order to stem the tide of demands that accompanied the end of the war and the first years that followed. This is true in all sectors of industry. And it's the same in the construction sector, where I've been particularly involved. When it comes to construction work, one is, much more than elsewhere, dependent on the vagaries of the weather. And, especially to cope with the whims of bad weather, over time, workers have obtained a special status that guarantees them, particularly during the bad season.

Bosses' offensive, inevitable struggle

As it happened, in 1968, the agreement guaranteeing respect for these acquired rights expired. Employers, for their part, felt the time had come to challenge this special status. They wanted to impose a new agreement that would exclude most of our previous benefits. Consequently, negotiations began and dragged on. They ultimately failed, and a national strike was called, paralyzing the entire sector across the country.

Once again, I propose the establishment of a strike committee. The history of the Left in Leval is still fresh in people's minds, and the committee is up and running from the start. It will extend its reach far and wide throughout the Centre region, and will even go beyond its borders if necessary. In particular, we brought all work on the major Walloon Highway construction sites then underway, from the outskirts of Gosselies to those of Ville-sur-Haine.

This time we prevailed. But following the hostilities, I was summoned three times to appear before the courts in Charleroi (twice) and Mons (once). I had to answer for certain accusations against me, which allegedly took place during the strike. Despite the best efforts of a particularly spiteful judge, especially in Mons, I emerged victorious. Once again, my behaviour during this strike would have repercussions. At the subsequent Congress, the assembly decided to nominate and elect me as a member of the executive committee of the Central Region General

Federation.

In the months that followed, my workload was so high that my colleagues at headquarters chose me to represent them on the FGTB's Central Regional Executive. I was 40 years old at the time. I served on it for four years. But at the following Congress, there was no question of renewing my mandate. The political tide was turning increasingly against the Left. A certain intransigence, for which I was supposedly guilty, was not to the liking of the majority of well-established civil servants who swore only by social peace, which kept all their worries at bay.

Now, the time for demobilization has come.

2 December 2025

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Gauche Anticapitaliste](#).*

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