

The emergence of the PTB:

“An amazing story”

The history of the renewal movement since 2004



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An extraordinary story lies behind the emergence of the PTB from a small party to a major political player. The announcement that Peter Mertens will not run again for president is an opportunity to look back at the renewal movement that began in 2004. We have traced this history through quotes from the mainstream press.

	members	sections	votes	MP's*	Local elected representatives**
2003	800	80	20.825	/	5
2008	2.800	120	56.157	/	15
2015	8.500	280	251.276	8	52
2021	24.000	400	584.621	43	169

* Elected in Parliament in 2019: European Parliament: 1; House of Representatives: 12; Senate: 5; Flemish Parliament: 4; Walloon Parliament: 10; Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region: 11; Parliament of the French Community: 13

** Local elected representatives, in 2018 : 43 in 21 municipal and district councils in Flanders, 36 in 7 municipal councils in Brussels, and 78 in 16 municipal councils in Wallonia. And also 12 provincial councillors.

“It’s an amazing story.” These are the words of Indian journalist and Marxist Vijay Prashad about the progress of the PTB. And it’s true; it’s an incredible story. Starting as a small party, the PTB has become a major political player in Belgium over the past twenty years.

It’s a story like no other, because it really went against the tide. In the rest of Europe, Marxist parties have had a very difficult time. According to the US magazine Jacobin, the PTB is today “one of the most dynamic forces on the European left”. “The elections on 26 May 2019 only confirmed this picture,” the socialist magazine adds.

Anyone who thinks that the implosion of traditional parties is automatically favourable to the genuine left should take a look at the rest of Europe. The left is suffering, and is often in retreat. Except in Belgium, where the “uninhibited left” (a term coined by a former journalist Jos Bouveroux) has been on the rise for two decades.

And yet, the story could have been quite different. In 2003, the small committed party was knocked out. Peter Mertens told Humo magazine about the renewal of the PTB behind the scenes: In the past, Antwerp was surrounded by a “red belt”, where the socialists got up to 40 % of the votes. In the 1990s, most of those votes moved to the [fascist] Vlaams Blok, not to us. And it was partly our fault, because we were too dogmatic, too sectarian, too preachy. Too hermetic in fact, which bothered me a lot. It all came to a head when we completely blew it in the 2003 federal election with Resist [electoral alliance between the PTB and the Arab European League, editor’s note]. We hit the wall head on and realised we couldn’t go on like that. We had to renew ourselves or disappear.”

“Renew or disappear” was the choice in 2003

Renewing itself or disappearing, the two paths opened to the PTB in 2003. That year, the party won a mere 20,825 votes in the federal election. Hardly anyone was betting on its future anymore. The party was at odds with the unions, with progressive organisations, with just about everyone, in fact. The PTB still had only a few dozen sections, and ageing members. Marxists were becoming more and more distant from people’s everyday concerns.

Within the party, more and more voices were being raised to say that we cannot go on like this, and that we must put an end to this attitude of lecturing, this disconnection from reality and this dogmatism. At general meetings, the members voted overwhelmingly in favour of renewal. This was the tipping point and what would save the PTB. Some hard leftists were kicked out of the party. Peter Mertens, Baudouin Deckers and Lydie Neufcourt were elected to form the new executive committee. This trio was tasked with launching the renewal movement, and they did so with 800 motivated party members.

“It took the younger generation to say that things couldn’t go on like this for the renewal to begin, and it worked,” journalist Walter Pauli later wrote in Knack. “Peter Mertens is recognized by his friends and enemies alike as the architect of this success.” The renewal is not only the work of young people, but of the different generations who were united in the new team. And this was precisely the strength of the PTB’s renewal: the fact that it was so widely supported by the different generations of the party.

The motto of this team: “Back to the roots”. They wanted to tackle the concrete problems of the working class. Not with words, but with deeds. An important first step was taken in 2004 when Dr. Dirk Van Duppen of Medicine for the People launched the “kiwi model” to make medicines more affordable. This campaign brought new energy to the PTB, and put the party back on the Belgian political map. “It has been an amazing success” we read on this subject. The sp.a (Flemish Socialist Party) tried to claim the “kiwi” by tabling a proposal along the same lines. Half of the CSC (Christian Unions Federation) and the entire MOC (Christian Workers Movement) supported Dirk Van Duppen.”



The campaign for the kiwi model marked a first turning point. A second key moment came the following year with the fight against the Generation Pact of the socialist Minister of Pensions Bruno Tobback. On 28 October 2005, 100,000 trade unionists demonstrated in Brussels against the pension reform. At the sp.a congress, hundreds of trade unionists literally turned their backs on social democracy. Many of them would join the PTB and play a crucial role in its renewal. The same process was at work in the south of the country, where dozens of trade unionists were joining the authentic left, disgusted by the “wheeling and dealing” and the continued participation of the PS in the various austerity governments. This is how the Marxists reconnected with the trade union movement.

The new leadership mobilised the party for its Renewal Congress, which was focused on three areas: being a party of principles, being a flexible party, being a party of the working class. An approach that was bearing fruit, as *Le Monde Diplomatique* pointed out: “To understand the rise of the PTB, we have to go back to the strategic turn taken at its 2008 congress.”⁹ It was at this 2008 renewal Congress that Peter Mertens was elected party president. “Today, with the economic crisis, Marx is more relevant than ever, he says. He remains our source of inspiration because we subscribe to his critique of capitalism.” At the same time, the renewed party was shedding its old dogmatism. “No more dogmatism, make way for a party that is closer to people’s daily problems”, noted *La Libre Belgique*. The PTB was looking for its own way. “We can learn from others. But there is no question of copying and pasting what is happening elsewhere. The Dutch SP has abandoned all reference to Marxism and focuses all its actions on the neighbourhoods, whereas for us, the presence in the world of labour remains a primary concern.”

From now on, the PTB topics would carry weight in the political debate

According to the leading British socialist magazine Tribune, "the party's reorganisation and renewal process at the 2008 Congress" played a "crucial role" in positioning it as "a credible alternative, offering both a social and ecological discourse and practical solutions to the economic problems created by the financial crisis".

The party was growing rapidly. All over the country, new chapters were being created, through trial and error. A process organised by Lydie Neufcourt, who had been involved in the party's leadership as part of the daily management since 2004.

Marxists kept their cool, and knew what they wanted. They wanted to build a strong Marxist party throughout the country, with sections in working-class neighbourhoods and workplaces. They wanted to build a party that could weather storms and shocks. "It's like the three little pigs," the party president told L'Avenir. "There are those who build houses that end up being blown up. We built a brick house because we know we can still expect storms."

In the south of the country, the four traditional parties (MR, cdH, PS and Ecolo) seemed to monopolise political life. The arrival of the PTB as a force to be reckoned with started to upset the status quo. At first described as the mosquito that bites the established order, it grew as a solid organisation.

In less than eighteen years, the PTB went from 80 sections and 800 members to 400 sections with a total of 24,000 members, which represented a real leap forward. Especially since the PTB did not want its members to be passive political consumers, but to be alert members. "We are a grassroots party," explained Peter Mertens. "We are much more than a handful of elected officials. We don't tell people that we're going to solve problems for them. We do not want PS-style clientelism. Our ideal is: wake up, stand up and fight for your rights."



Things were also changing politically. “I think the far left is an interesting phenomenon, but neither I nor my party are part of it,” Mertens told Humo magazine. The party wanted to influence the debate and put debates on the agenda itself. So it launched the “millionaires’ tax,” a carefully crafted proposal to create a wealth tax that would affect only the richest two percent of the country. Much more than a slogan, it was a concrete call to action, a weapon that the PTB used when it went on the field.

Under the direction of David Pestieau, the PTB’s research department published one hot file after another. This red idea factory also attracted the attention of journalists. “The party has invested a lot in its research department and PTB members such as Tom De Meester (energy) and Marco Van Hees (taxation) are leading experts in the media. They never deviate from the party’s guiding principle: to rely on hard numbers. And above all: no exclamation marks, but nuance.” From then on, the PTB topics would carry weight in the political debate. “It is difficult to deny the accuracy of the facts and figures provided by the PTB,” said the well-known journalist Rik Van Cauwelaert.

“Today, the party communicates sharply, finely, and to the point”

First, we lay the foundations and then we define the communication,” the PTB explained. Communication was also changing. “It had to change: both in terms of image and language,” said the party president. “Before, the PTB only addressed the mind, which mostly resulted in long, drawn-out leaflets. Today we want to speak to the mind, but also to the heart.” When communal squabbles took over the 2009 elections, Marxists denounced the “political circus” of the ‘rue de la Loi’ bubble [the street where the Prime Minister’s office is situated, editor’s note]. “The PTB puts a red nose on politics”, headlines a major daily newspaper. For the first time in its existence, the PTB, which was not yet represented in any parliament at the time, became the talk of the town.

The little David who had to face Goliath knew that communication was essential in its fight. “The notion of ‘political marketing’ has long since ceased to be a dirty word in the PTB,” wrote Knack magazine. “Gone is the style of the early years, when election posters often looked like an entire chapter in a Marxist textbook. The party started communicating in a sharp, fine and to-the-point manner.” The party was inspired by the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, for whom language was an essential element in the struggle for cultural hegemony. In this spirit, Tom De Meester launched the term “Turtel Tax” in 2015 to refer to the unfair energy tax introduced by Flemish minister Annemie Turtelboom.

Language was important, but rigorous economic analysis remained the basis, as Le Monde Diplomatique pointed out: “However, if the PTB leaders assume their semantic turn, they keep their distance from the notion of populism, even if it is left-wing. It is above all a question of building a “socialism 2.0”, in the words of PTB president Peter Mertens, which would continue to give the notion of class struggle a predominant place. “We want to have a discourse based on class analysis, but adapted to today’s situation,” explains Charlie Le Paige, who chairs Comac, the PTB youth movement.”

With thousands of active members in working-class neighbourhoods and factories, abandoned by the traditional parties long ago, the party had a huge advantage: it was able to take the pulse of the workers directly. “No one knows the terrain as well as the PTB,” the papers write. “In addition, the party regularly releases exclusive information. They were the ones to reveal that multinationals in Belgium pay virtually no tax.” This combination of local knowledge and rigorous analysis was one of the strengths of the PTB. And the party is careful to keep the stories alive and recognizable to the people, without drowning them in a multitude of numbers and graphs. “We have to develop our own story-telling,” the PTB president told the U.S. magazine *Jacobin*.

“More readers than votes”

“The PTB is the last Belgian party. How come you haven’t split up yet?”, a journalist asked Peter Mertens, the newly elected president. He answered: “I think that’s a funny question. How come all the other parties are divided? Is it not strange that all the parties in Parliament only participate in elections on one side of the language border? Wouldn’t a federal circumscription make sense?” No to splitting, yes to unity. The French newspaper *Le Monde* also noted: “For Peter Mertens, the president of the PTB, the “two democracies” that coexist in Belgium are rather that of the rich and that of the poor, and he therefore advocates “common struggles” for the north and the south of the kingdom.”

The president dreamt of a solidarity festival inspired by the *Fête de l’Humanité* in Paris, organised by the communist daily *L’Humanité*. During the presentation of the book ‘*Priorité de gauche*’ (Left Priority) in Ostend, someone told him that there might be a place for such an initiative in Bredene. Nobody believed that the PTB could gather 10,000 people, but the party was determined to do it. Thus, *ManiFiesta* was born in 2010. The festival now lasts several days and welcomes some 15,000 visitors. “We are one, we are all one” was the motto of the speech given at the first edition of *ManiFiesta*. This was the beginning of a long solidarity movement, which finally led in 2021 to the manifesto “We Are One” published by the vice-president of the PTB David Pestieau, where he speaks in favour of the unity of Belgium.

Meanwhile, the party was growing, patiently. It now had many more chapters, especially in the world of labour. Under the leadership of Kim De Witte, the provincial directorates were gradually being renewed and rejuvenated. The party became active in all provinces of the country. The research department became known for its solid and thoroughly researched dossiers on taxation, energy, health care, pensions, public services and democratic rights. The most successful campaign was the one against high energy prices, which led first to the reduction of VAT on electricity and then to the abolition of the *Turtel Tax* in Flanders.

The party’s first large-scale breakthrough, however, came not in an election but with... a book. To everyone’s surprise, ‘*How Dare They? The euro, the crisis and the big hold-up*’ reached, upon its release in December 2011, the top spot in the Top 10 nonfiction in Flanders, a position it would hold for nearly a year. “More readers than votes”, headlined *De Standaard*. “A best-seller with Marxist ideas”, headlined *Le Soir*. The author

went on a road trip and, multiplying the conferences (150 in total), visited almost all the town halls in the country. The comments were full of praise. “In ‘How Dare They?’, Peter Mertens puts all his verve at the service of ideological debate”, a journalist wrote. “Opinion makers of all stripes praise his work. The book is very close to people’s realities. This only made the shock bigger.” With 25,000 copies sold, ‘How Dare They?’ was now the second best-selling political book in Belgium.

“Beyond the European construction, it is the capitalist system that is in crisis,” underlined L’Humanité Dimanche in its review of the book. “Mertens’ book carries the conviction of a deep societal debate, to move towards a socialist system adapted to the 21st century, ‘socialism 2.0’. ‘A society that respects both sources of wealth in the right sense of the word: human labour and nature, while capitalism over exploits both,’ as the author says.”

“Achieving the impossible: the PTB as a full-fledged player on the political scene

A Marxist backbone, a working class party, active members, new sections, an expanded research service, professional communication and ‘punchy’ books.” But the renewed party also needed figureheads. And that’s where the flamboyant Raoul Hedebouw came in: “Mertens (1969) and Hedebouw (1977) have known each other since they were in school”, we read. In 1994, Wallonia was rocked for months by strikes to protest against education reforms. At the Herstal athenaeum, Raoul had founded the ‘Che’: the ‘Comité Herstalien des Écoliers (Herstalian Student Committee)’. At the time, Mertens was president of the PTB student movement and had gone to help in Liège. They maintained the friendship they had started at the time, but also the division of tasks. Mertens: ‘Raoul was already the spokesman of the youth movement, I was working a bit more in the background. It still works today, even if the level is different!’

The two men shared mutual respect. Mertens: “Raoul Hedebouw is our Eden Hazard. I knew it the first time I saw him, a student leader perched on a Coca-Cola rack, facing a crowded playground with everyone hanging on his every word. Without him, the party would not have evolved as quickly as it has.” Hedebouw: “Without Peter, I would not be here. He convinced me of his vision of a renewed PTB, and took me on the adventure as a spokesperson for a modern project. We make a good team.”

At the 2008 Renewal Congress, participants set goals for themselves. In the 2012 municipal elections, the party wanted to advance in three cities. “The party is aiming for a breakthrough in October in three major cities: Antwerp, Liège and Molenbeek,” wrote Le Soir in early 2012.³⁵ It worked. And not just a little. In Liège, the PTB entered the municipal council with 6.41 % of the votes; in Antwerp, the communists obtained 8 %. The PTB was on the right track. Jos Bouveroux, former VRT journalist, reported: “The PTB surprised everyone by getting no less than 8 % of the votes in the municipal elections in Antwerp in October 2012. Its young leader Peter Mertens (1969) is the real deal. He achieved the impossible: he transformed a far-left party into a full-fledged political player. Until now, the PTB has only achieved figurative scores, hardly higher than 1%.”

The party resolutely opted for the working class, abandoned by the traditional parties. “PTB president Peter Mertens announced the name of the new PTB list leader for Limburg: Gaby Colebunders, former shop steward at Ford Genk. Mertens introduced the new recruit as follows: “Gaby is all about the social. Gaby grew up in the mining towns, among the people. Gaby is a worker like many others. And above all, Gaby is a fighter. Gaby is an individual metaphor for what the PTB wants to be collectively as a left-wing party.”

In the meantime, the shift to the right was also continuing, especially in the Dutch-speaking political landscape. Marxists also wanted to capture this discontent and channel it into a rebellious, left-wing voice. They took the long view. “Sociologically speaking, we represent ten percent of the vote,” said the party president in the spring of 2014. “We’re not going to get them now, but it’s a realistic potential. Our new generation is ready.” That same year, the PTB made a huge leap forward with 251,276 votes, twelve times more than ten years earlier. Raoul Hedebouw (Liège) and Marco Van Hees (Hainaut) were elected to the House of Representatives. For the first time in 33 years, Marxists were returning to Parliament, and it would not go unnoticed. In the province of Antwerp, the PTB obtained 4.5 % of the votes and, despite the high personal score of Mertens, missed the seat narrowly.

In the autumn of 2014, the PTB actively mobilised in support of the trade union and citizen movement against the austerity plans of the new right-wing government. On 6 November 2014, 120,000 combative trade unionists marched through the streets of Brussels, supported by the citizen movement Hart boven Hard - Tout Autre Chose, which brings together hundreds of social organisations. Three provincial strikes followed. Then, on 15 December, a general strike. The right-wing government was faltering but resisting, and the PTB threw itself into the social struggle to challenge the right-wing austerity policies.



In the meantime, the party devoted a lot of attention to forming new forces. In the spring of 2015, 'The Millionaire Tax and 7 Other Brilliant Ideas for Changing Society' was published. A book written by the 'How Dare They?' generation.

"9 out of 10 chances of running into a PTB member at a picket line"

The PTB continued to patiently build its foundations. Under the leadership of Lydie Neufcourt, the party grew from 80 to 280 branches and 8,500 members. The party held its Solidarity Congress in 2015, under the title 'Broadening, Uniting, Deepening'. It elaborated its project of a socialism 2.0.

Mertens was re-elected as president, David Pestieau was elected vice-president and Lydie Neufcourt took over the task of national secretary. They continued on the path of renewal, with a new National Council to be elected at the Congress. The party leadership invested in training new leaders, expanding local chapters, and building strong focus areas. In the Federal Parliament, Raoul Hedebouw and Marco Van Hees made a name for themselves. Hedebouw quickly became the darling of the working class all over the country: In Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders, 'cool Raoul' was becoming more and more known and appreciated.

For the Paris climate summit in late 2015, the party launched its "Red is the New Green" campaign to pose the climate issue as a systemic problem. "The climate transition will be social or it won't be at all," said the Marxists. They opposed the climate sceptics and eco-modernists whose lobbies were doing everything they could to minimise the climate problem. But they were not any more in favour of the climate elitists who wanted to send the bill to the working class and the people of the South. A young generation of climate activists joined the PTB, like Jos D'Haese or Natalie Eggermont. When U.S. President Trump decided to visit our country, they helped organise the protest 'Trump Not Welcome'.

Socialist feminism was also put on the agenda with the women's organisation Marianne, led by Maartje De Vries. Marianne made a point of reacting to every feminicide in the country and contributed, along with many other organisations, to reviving the International Women's Rights Day on March 8 in our country. "No socialism without feminism, no feminism without socialism" is the credo of Marianne.

When the Walloon government declared itself opposed to the new CETA free trade agreement in the autumn of 2016, international financial magazines couldn't believe it. "When European officials were negotiating a trade deal with Canada for five years, they didn't think they had to pay so much attention to the opinions of people like Frederic Gillot," noted the Financial Times. "A 54-year old moustachioed steel worker who represents the neo-communist Belgian Workers Party in the regional parliament of Wallonia, Mr. Gillot is now one of the participants in a drama that has seen a local assembly threaten to wreck an EU-Canada agreement."



“The party that is pulling the Belgian left to the left,” wrote the European weekly *Politico*. The party that was trying to pull the political landscape to the left, with content. In December 2016, Mertens released his third opus, ‘In the Land of the Profiteers’, which also rose to the top of the non-fiction lists. The Flemish magazine *Samenleving & Politiek* was full of praise: “Alongside the content, there is the pleasure of reading, and here Mertens deserves much praise. His book does not deal with an easy subject. It is about politics, economics and ideology. And yet, once again, Mertens succeeds in explaining this complex material in an understandable and even enjoyable way. The book is full of examples that make this uninviting topic lively and tangible. Bravo.”

The RedFox youth organisation was created in 2016. They quickly made a name for themselves with DiverCity, an extensive anti-racism campaign. The fight against sexism and the fight for the climate also became essential themes for youth organisations, which, a few years later, would reach thousands of young people via TikTok and social media. The PTB, too, was committed to the fight against racism and was mobilising for the demonstrations on 21 March, the international day against racism.

In the 2018 municipal elections, the party aimed to triple its number of elected officials to 150. And it did. In the end, there were 169 of them, spread over the three regions of the country. In Flanders, the party first made inroads in the large urban centres. In Brussels, the party was firmly established and, in Wallonia, the authentic left was making inroads in all the big cities as well as in the red periphery of Liège, with scores of 15 % and more.

Journalists became interested in the phenomenon: “Herstal is one of the Liège municipalities where the PTB has been strong for many years. And this is largely thanks to Nadia Moscufo. The former Aldi cashier has been a member of the town council since 2000. She has just graduated from high school. “I was second on the list. I didn’t expect to be elected,” she says. Eighteen years later, she is the group leader and head of the list. Successfully. On Sunday, her group achieved nine seats. “I’m glad my party

doesn't stop at whether you have a degree or not." In the capital, Francis Dagrin, an Audi worker and trade unionist, was elected to the Brussels Parliament in 2019. When asked what his colleagues think of his election, he said: "They knew I was a PTB activist. In this working class environment, the party is well regarded. On 27 May [the day after election day, editor's note], when we went back to work, a large part of my colleagues saw my election as their victory."

Social struggle remained at the heart of the party's work. A trade unionist told the Echo newspaper: "It's quite simple: if you have a picket line, you have a nine out of ten chance of running into a PTB member, chances are way lower to run into a socialist." The Belgian financial newspaper itself noted: "A prominent example: the national strike on February 13, 2019. On this day alone, the far-left formation visited more than 600 pickets between Arlon and Zeebrugge, a real demonstration of strength on the ground."

"Unexpected: suddenly Flemish TV had to install a seventh desk"

The party wanted to break through in the 2019 federal and regional elections, and campaigned on a change platform that included 840 proposals. The ideas of the Marxist party were appreciated and announced a breakthrough in the elections. "The 'great debate of the party presidents' was not planned according to what happened on 26 May", the press would later write. "On Flemish television, only the presidents of the parties represented in the Flemish Parliament are allowed to participate in the debates. Until Saturday, Mertens was therefore not allowed to take part, but on Sunday evening things suddenly changed. So the technicians had to rush to set up a seventh desk."

In the week before the elections, a well-known political scientist was still certain that there was "no room" for the PTB in Flanders. At VRT [Flemish public TV, editor's note], they had not taken the PTB into account and had not provided a desk. The elections proved them wrong: "The great success of the PTB was somewhat overshadowed by the advance of Vlaams Belang. However, in the House of Representatives, the communists are now as important as the CD&V and the Flemish liberals. They do almost as well as the far right. The PTB won 35 additional seats, only four fewer than Vlaams Belang, and now has 43 seats in the various parliaments."

This was not lost on the British magazine Tribune either: "26 May was a political earthquake in Belgium. The Workers Party won a large victory in the regional, federal and European elections, and has firmly established itself as a left-wing alternative to the centre-left and green parties throughout the country." The socialist magazine mentioned the great progress in Brussels and Wallonia, but also noted the breakthrough in Flanders: "Moreover, in the region of Flanders, they succeeded in capturing a political foothold despite dominating cultural and political hegemony of the conservative nationalist political forces throughout the past decade and the electoral success of the far-right Vlaams Belang, which obtained 18 federal seats."

Striking: the PTB immediately sent four workers to Parliament. They are Nadia Moscufo, Gaby Colebunders, Maria Vindevoghel and Roberto D'Amico. Together, these four MPs represented over 100 years of union experience. They wore their hearts on their sleeves and brought a breath of fresh air to the House of Representatives. "The Flemish of the PTB are preparing to sit in the parliaments. And there are many more of them than they ever dared to imagine," wrote Het Nieuwsblad. A great deal of pressure was placed on the shoulders of the young Antwerp local Jos D'Haese. "Jos D'Haese, once a climate activist, must become the Flemish Hedeboom," it read.

"I'm staying on board, but it's time for another captain"

The electoral breakthrough gave the PTB wings, but also a lot more work to do. The party now had 400 branches and 24,000 members. For national secretary Lydie Neufcourt's team, the days were long. This also applied to vice president David Pestieau, whom one newspaper jokingly called "the lowest paid vice president": "David Pestieau (51) is probably the lowest paid vice president and head of the research department of any party. In the PTB, the salaries of the leaders are also aligned with those of the workers. But the volume of their work is certainly not less. No party is represented in so many parliaments: the 'national' party has elected members in the Flemish, federal, Walloon, Brussels and European parliaments, and in the parliament of the French Community."

For the first time, the Marxists were also present in the European Parliament, with the polyglot Marc Botenga, who is originally Dutch-speaking, but who also speaks French, English and Italian perfectly. He is a member of the broad left-wing group The Left. It has 41 members, divided into 19 delegations from 13 countries. Over the past year, Botenga has made a name for himself in the European Parliament for his advocacy of the European Citizens' Initiative 'No Profit on The Pandemic', which calls for the lifting of patents on Covid vaccines. Botenga was invited on the Italian RAI, the British BBC, the German ARD and many other European TV channels.

The PTB has many mothers and fathers. Free health care is one of them. And not the least. Together with Medicine for the People (whose president is Janneke Ronse), the party has 11 medical clinics throughout the country, with doctors and nurses providing free quality health care to 25,000 people. And this has been the case every day for forty years. It is therefore no coincidence that the PTB proposed an 'emergency fund for health care' during the 'white coat rage' in October 2019, even before the pandemic. The PTB's amendment was initially considered 'populist', but was finally approved by the Parliament. It would result in the hiring of hundreds of new people in hospitals. This shows how the PTB is a purveyor of innovative left-wing proposals.

During the coronavirus crisis, the PTB was one of the most active parties, both in the field with the hundreds of caregivers of Medicine for the People and in the Parliaments where Dr. Sofie Merckx (House of Representatives) and Dr. Lise Vandecasteele (Flemish Parliament) tirelessly tackled the political quarrels of the different Ministers of Health.



During the cold winter of the coronavirus in 2020, the PTB organised more than 600 concrete solidarity initiatives with 'A winter of solidarity' to help people in need.

The solidarity actions continued the following year, during the terrible floods that hit the country in July 2021. Faced with the failure of the authorities to take charge, aid was organised at the grassroots level. PTB members are not people who sit back and do nothing. The daily *Gazet Van Antwerpen* reported: "On Saturday 17 July, two days after the floods, Peter Mertens, president of the left-wing PTB, went to Verviers with a group of volunteers. Immediately, the PTB had launched an appeal via social media for volunteers to help." At the initiative of the party president, the SolidariTeams were born around a kitchen table in Liège: "Since then, more than 2,000 volunteers have gone to help via our SolidariTeams. The solidarity is immense and, strikingly, it also often comes from Flanders."

Since 2003, the PTB has come a long way. It's an amazing story. "I see the world changing, and I believe that good will come out of it," said the late Dr. Dirk Van Duppen in his farewell book in 2020, before succumbing to cancer. Needless to say, there is still a very long way to go to change this world. To turn it to the side of humanity, to the side of solidarity, to the side of respect for nature, to the side of socialism.

On 8 November 2021, President Peter Mertens announced that he would not be running for re-election at the Unity Congress on 5 December, saying: "It's time for another captain to do the job, and that's quite possible, because we have a whole new team. I'm staying on board, and I want to focus on strategic issues and the development of the party. We are rowing against the tide of capitalism, and it is not easy. We will take more hits, we will stumble and fall, and we will get up again. With a new generation of Marxists on board, and more young people and workers than ever in the leadership. We have political unity around our socialist project, and that is fundamental. And we also have strong unity throughout the country. When I go to Verviers, I go to a section

of the PTB and there I am at home, quite simply. I'm not there as a visitor. This unity is genuine, and the new president will be above all Marxist, Belgian and internationalist, with the challenge to change the world."

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