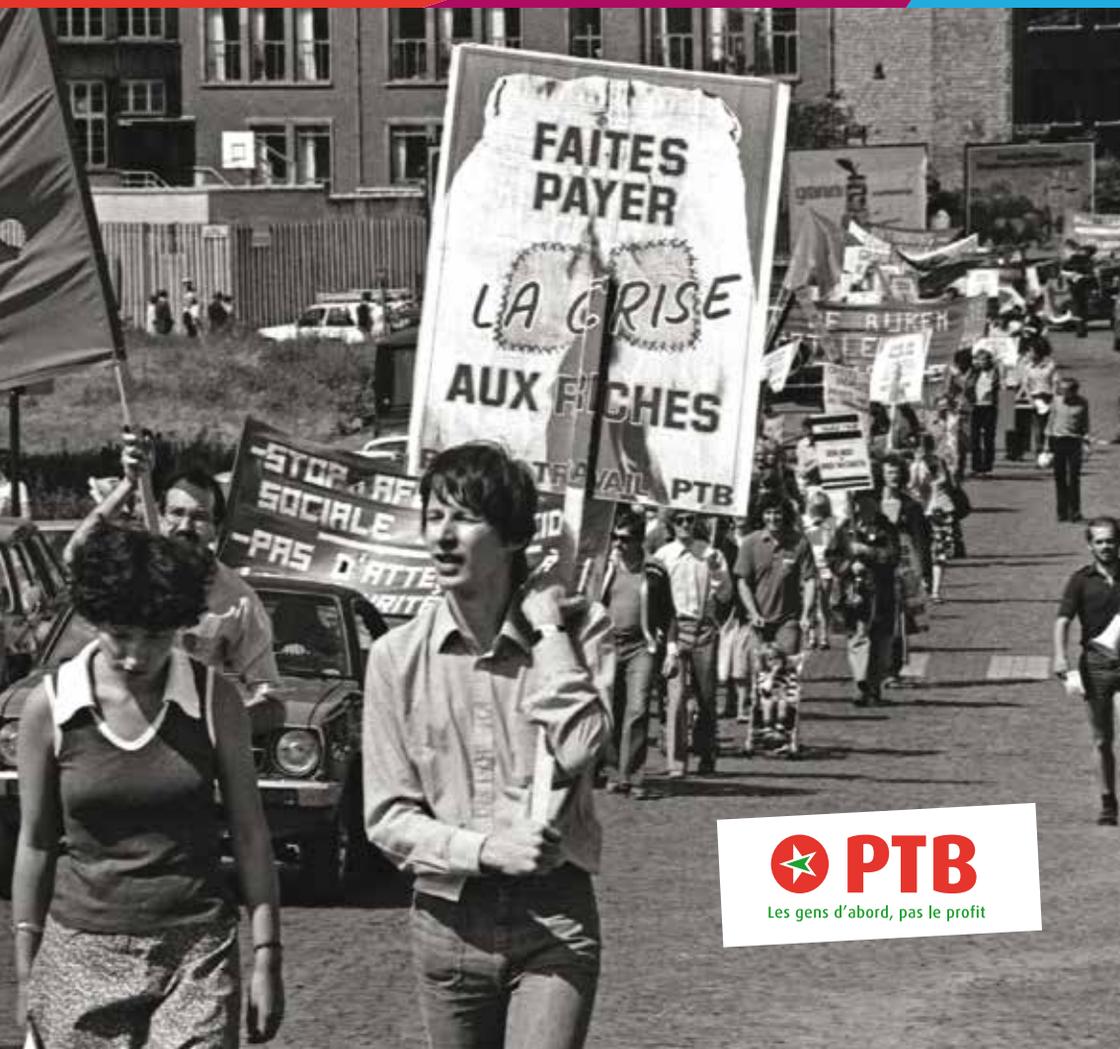


THE PTB A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

HALF A CENTURY OF MARXISM IN ACTION



 **PTB**
Les gens d'abord, pas le profit

THE PTB
A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

HALF A CENTURY OF MARXISM IN ACTION

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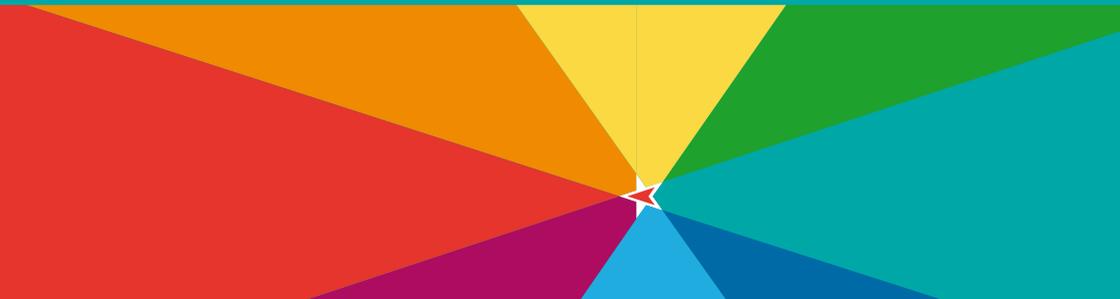
INTRODUCTION

It can be said that the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB, or PVDA with its Dutch acronym, Workers' Party of Belgium) has become an adult party. Indeed, its creation dates back to 1979. Some parties are older, others more recent. All have changed since their foundation, changing their name, or not, with much fanfare. The PTB has also changed, but with a little less fuss. Which have been the main developments of the PTB, a party that had to wait until 2014 to corral a quarter million voters and make its debut in Parliament but that, in terms of activism, has undisputedly been a frontrunner for a long time. An overview of half a century of Marxism in action.

**“THE WORST FORM
OF ABSURDITY IS TO
ACCEPT THE WORLD AS
IT IS TODAY, AND NOT TO
FIGHT FOR A WORLD AS IT
SHOULD BE.”**

AFTER JACQUES BREL

1966-1979
THE BEGINNINGS



THE SIXTIES, those famed golden sixties, were full of contradictions. While the Cuban revolution had just triumphed and the (formerly Belgian) Congo had become independent in 1960, in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the armies of Uncle Sam were massacring millions of people with bombs and napalm. The wheels of business could not have run better. Yet in 1966 in Zwartberg, a Limburg municipality, police forces shot down two miners fighting to keep the mines open. Everywhere, socialist-inspired popular movements were struggling against oppression and exploitation: the working class was restless. It was a time of great changes and demystification of taboos. Students inspired by Marxism united, among other places at the University of Leuven, within the *Studentenvakbeweging* (SVB - student union movement, 1967) and the University of Ghent, in the *Gentse studentenvakbeweging* (GSB - Ghent student union movement, 1968). Even before May 68 in Paris (and at the ULB in Brussels), the storm was already raging in Leuven in January. Right-wing students were screaming, “*Walen buiten*” (Out with Walloons). “Out with bourgeois” and “University for the people,” replied the SVB, which had a massive following. Marxism was gaining ground everywhere. Along with Berlin students and liberation theologians such as the Colombian priest Camilo Torres, who was studying in Leuven at the time, members of the SVB discovered the works of the founders of Marxism: Marx, Engels and Lenin are avidly read and thoroughly studied. This was the age of great ideals and strong discussions on how the world had to change. Aspirations were high: Belgium had to undergo drastic changes, capitalism had to disappear and socialism would reign on earth. In 1968, in a world of tumultuous changes, these claims did not seem exaggerated.

Today, it has become fashionable to separate May 68 from the social struggle. The fact that it was all about changing society and putting an end to war, exploitation and injustice is thus hidden and recast into a personal desire for strictly personal happiness. Nothing could be further from the truth. In Leuven, students took to the streets against a mostly French-speaking Catholic establishment. But they were also fighting the bourgeois Flemish and the elitism of the Flemish university, with its dearth of working class children. They were not calling for “flower power” but for a true democratization of higher education. Women organized to



On Saturday, November 2, 1968, thousands of Ford workers on strike took to the streets of Hasselt with the slogan “people first”.



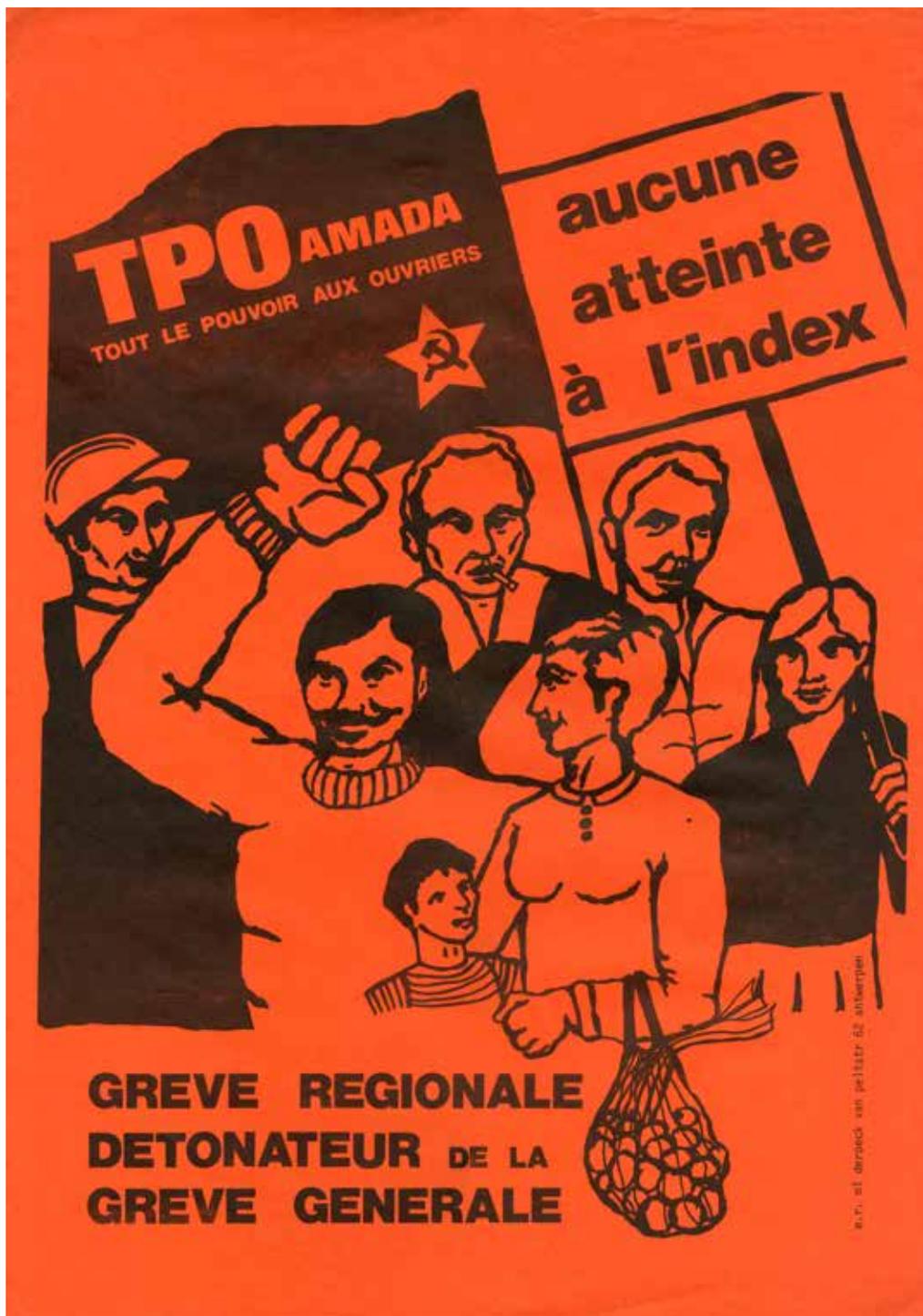
In January 1970, *Mijnwerkersmacht* (“miners’ power”) was one of the two strike committees at the beginning of the great Limburg mining strike.

claim power over their future and their choices against the patriarchal society, confining them to the Church, the children and the kitchen. They claimed the right to abortion. They also wanted equal pay for equal work. In 1966 – two years before May 68 – an 8-week strike of 3,000 women workers at the FN factory in Herstal demanding “equal pay for equal work” had already had international repercussions. Democratic lawyers did not advocate a policy of “anything goes”. They were denouncing – decades before the *Mouvement Blanc* (White Movement)¹ – the fact that anything is indeed allowed to a certain segment of the population. They were criticizing the a class-based justice that the rich were increasingly sidestepping while commoners were given the runaround in the state apparatus maze. In several neighbourhoods, young lawyers organized accessible ragtag legal clinics. Medical students were not demanding freedom to “experiment with drug use”; they were criticizing a medical system that only allotted three minutes per patient, and the systematic prescription of pills by a caste of elitist doctors, often sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry. The peace movement denounced the imperialist US intervention in Indochina. The anti-racist movement grew in solidarity with the US Black Liberation Movement.

The idea of a united front between workers and students coincided with a wave of solidarity with liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In October 1968, students joined a strike at Ford Genk, and in March 1969, they support textile industry strikes in Ghent. A truly critical choice occurred a year later when, in January 1970, 25,000 miners begin a wildcat strike that would last six weeks. Against the influence of the nationalist Volksunie in mining, young miners, students inclined towards social justice and members of the SVB joined together in a strike committee entitled *Mijnwerkersmacht* (Power to the Miners). In April of that year, the workers of the Cockerill Shipyards went on strike. These meetings and the study of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* led to the idea of founding a new workers’ party: not just a struggle committee or an independent workers’ committee, but a new communist party.

Words lead to deeds: leftist students decided to give up a career in medicine, psychology or education and take up jobs as labourers in dozens of companies. At first they met with suspicion but, at the same

1 The White Movement arose in the wake of the Dutroux scandal in 1996. Dutroux was at the heart of a case where children were kidnapped, raped and murdered in Belgium. After his arrest, hundreds of thousands of marchers demanded a reform of justice and police institutions, and better protection for Belgian children.



Poster of the young TPO-Amada, 1976.

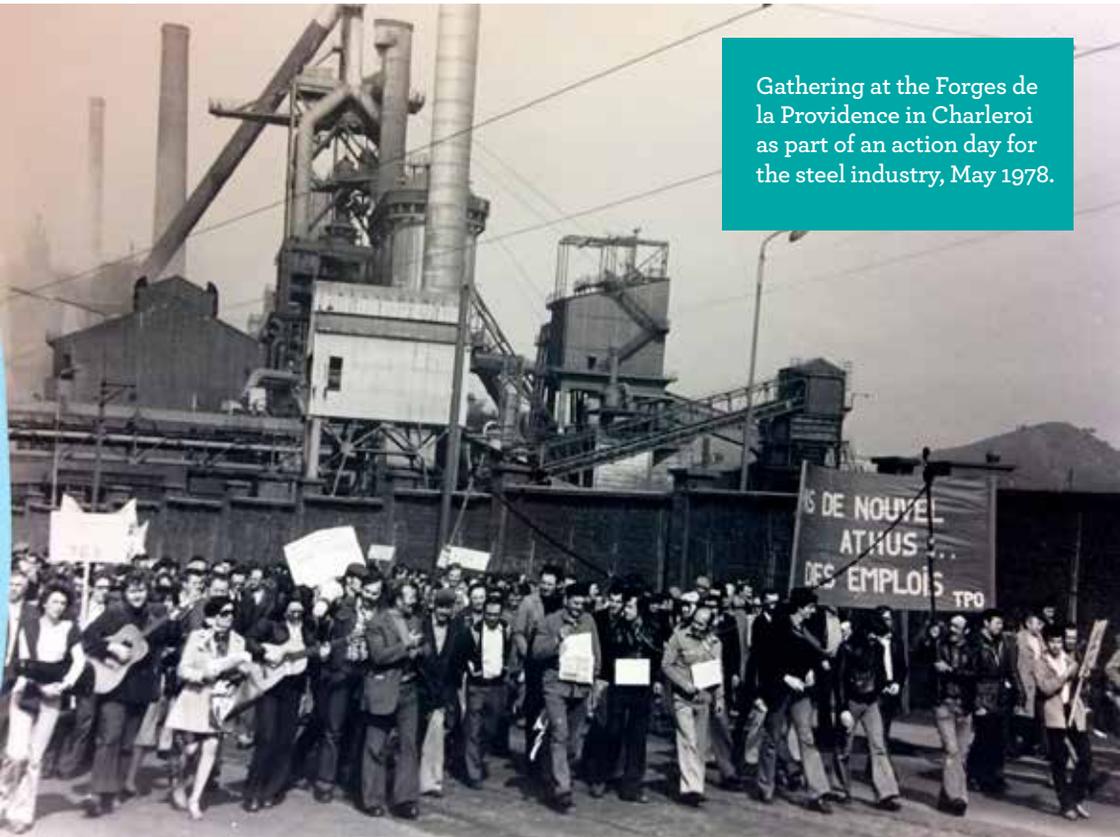
time, their skills were in demand. Gradually, they developed this new workers' party and laying the groundwork for the PTB's presence at the largest factories of the country.

October 5, 1970 marks the first issue of *Alle macht aan de arbeiders* (AMADA) (*Tout le Pouvoir aux Ouvriers* - TPO), a newspaper that would be published every three weeks, at a price of 10 Belgian francs. The budding new party took the same name. In the working-class district of Hoboken (Antwerp) the idea of Doctors for the People was born and a medical centre opened on January 1, 1971. The ideals to serve the people became reality. Hoboken was followed by Genk (1974), Lommel (1975), Zelzate (1977), Herstal (1979) and, later still, six other medical centres. At the time, free medicine was still a taboo issue for the establishment. The ultraconservative Order of Physicians began waging a long war against Doctors for the People. When the Order tried to seize the furniture of the young doctors who refused to pay professional dues, hundreds of patients took up the defence of their pioneer doctors. Doctors for the People medical centres provided a significant outreach for AMADA. "Rely on the people" was the motto of the young party builders, and those were not empty words. In 1974, the party organized a support campaign in order to fund a weekly and, immediately afterwards, another campaign to finance its own printing press. Activists collected the equivalent of 100,000 euros of today. The budding new party had national ambitions from the start. Several discussions to achieve unity with the Marxists from the student movement in Wallonia and Brussels failed because of different interpretations of Marxism. After countless attempts at unification, the young AMADA decided (in the years 1975-1976) to begin campaigning by itself in the South, under the label All Power to the Workers (TPO).

In France, in the spring of 1968, ten million workers went on strike and sided with protesting students. The movement ended with the Grenelle agreement: a 10% wage increase, a 35% increase in the minimum wage (SMIC), a reduction in the working week (44 hours) and the acknowledgement of labour rights in the workplace. Student and parent councils were accredited in schools. In our own country, the storm was not as strong, but the spirit of May 68 also rocked the business world in the early seventies. Nearly 700 strikes broke out in Belgium between 1970 and 1973; mostly wildcat initiatives, unrecognized



TPO-Amada activists demonstrate in the various working-class districts of Charleroi on the eve of the April 1977 elections.



Gathering at the Forges de la Providence in Charleroi as part of an action day for the steel industry, May 1978.

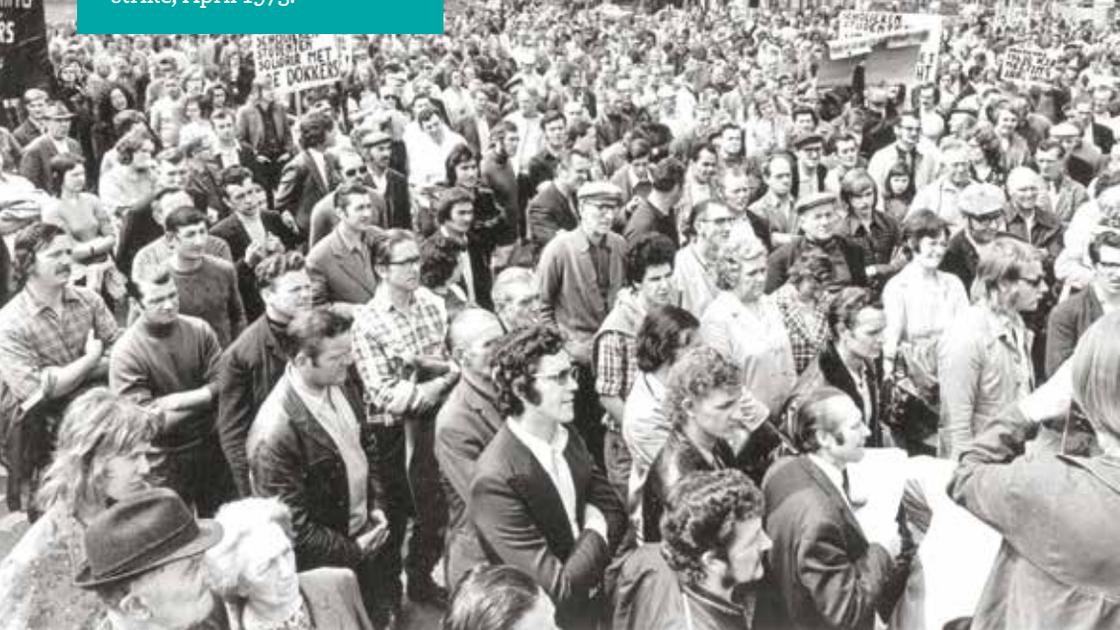
by the trade unions. The most well-known occurred at Ford Genk (1970), Forges de Clabecq (1970), Citroën Forest (1970), and Vieille Montagne in Balen (1971). Other strikes at Boel Shipyards (Temse, in the Waas region), Tessenderlo Chemie and Glaverbel (Gilly), were union-led.

During this period, the young AMADA was also committed to the defence of democratic rights, demanding decent housing for new immigrants who had been parked in huts, and the regularization of refugees. It also opposed the creation of a professional army. In January 1973, tens of thousands of high school and university students took to the streets against plans for such an army. A major campaign also prevented the adoption of strike-busting legislation by Social-Democrat Minister Vranckx, taking aim at strike committees and wildcat strike pickets.

The period was full of changes. In the US, agitation against racism and discrimination was growing; the Black Panther Party led the fight against the oppression of Afro-Americans. The movement to become masters of their own wealth was developing worldwide. From Algeria (1962) to Angola (1975), this movement culminated with the liberation of Vietnam in 1975, where, after 1.5 million Vietnamese deaths, a determined people forced occupying American forces to their knees. This liberation struggle of a small nation against the first military and economic world power dominated news bulletins for years and made a big impression in our country. In Portugal, the Communists played an important role in the Carnation Revolution (1974) that overthrew fascism while in Greece, that same year, a popular uprising ended the extreme-right Colonels' regime. It was a time when everyone had to choose sides; neutrality was not in tune with the times.

When, in April 1973, thousands of dockers stopped work in Ghent and Antwerp, Belgian ports were thrown into disarray. The strike lasted eight weeks. Dockers did not receive strike pay and their families were starving. A strike committee organized assistance to needy families. Dockers' wives were called upon to support their spouses. They took the lead in a banned demonstration calling for strike pay. They set up the Dockers' Wives Committee, which was to join AMADA. The strike unleashed a great wave of solidarity. Small shopkeepers provided food, artists organized solidarity concerts and collections were organized at

Large solidarity meeting at Sint-Jansplein with the Antwerp dockworkers' strike, April 1973.



Sale of vegetables to dockworkers by the Amada Women's Committee in resistance to index manipulation (1976).



numerous factory gates. In the wake of the dockers' strike and based on a trumped-up charge, 17 dockers and AMADA activists were sentenced to long prison terms in the "docks trial". These sentences were later reduced on appeal.

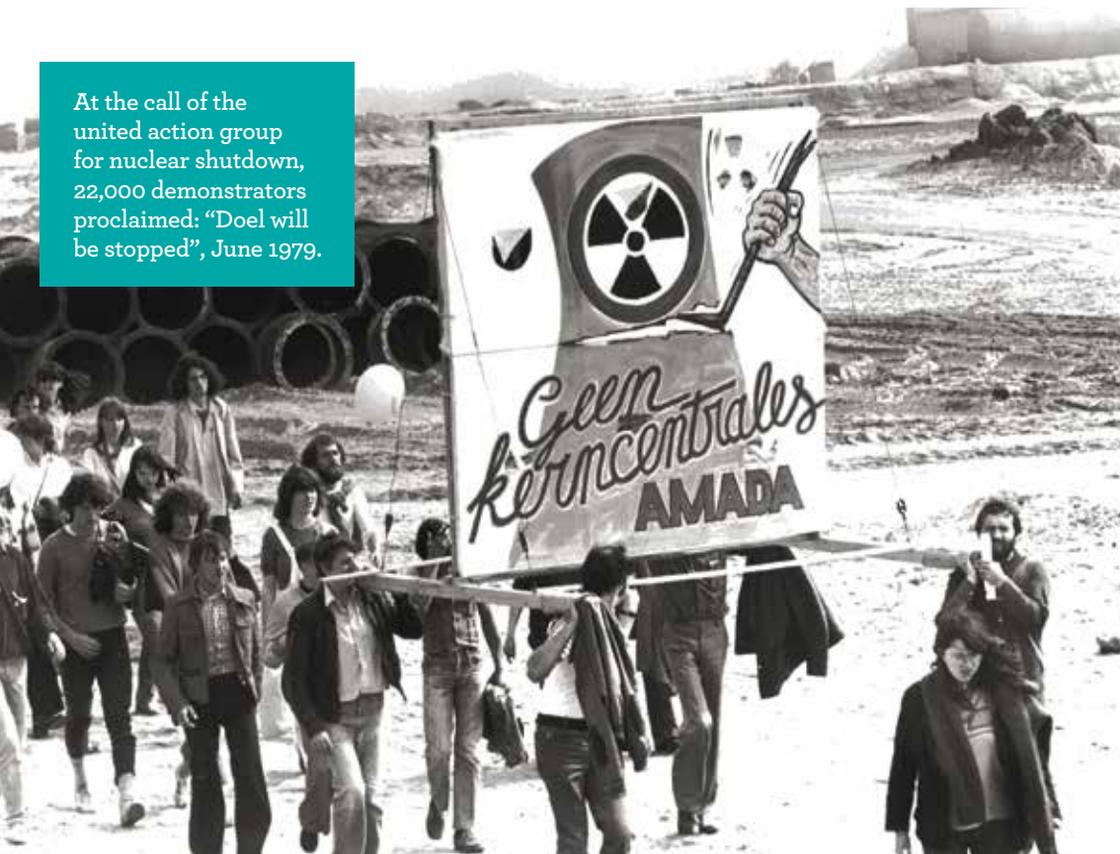
For the young, idealist party, the dockers' strike proved to be a hard lesson, its baptism of fire. Our Party rules and the national leadership had to reshape the young organization into an effective party in which workers could feel at home, far from the chaos of a student organization. This was not easy. The carefree student ethos of the past made way for very high demands and the core remained small. At the political level, the party approach remained immature: lengthy tracts dispensed general truths about socialism, far above the heads of people and their daily reality. In 1976, AMADA decided to correct its sectarianism and dogmatism, in a spirit of self-criticism. The young party sought practical achievements, built on patience, accentuation of positive developments, thinking in function of the majority, and implementation of a wide range of activities and fronts around concrete points of action. These guidelines would again become priorities at the 2008 Renewal Congress.

On the trade union front, too, a new approach prevailed. The party came to life in a period of wildcat strikes and had drawn false conclusions about the impossibility of undertaking anything with traditional unions. Militant union leaders, such as those of the Boel Shipyards in Temse and others, educated the party about its mistake. It therefore decided to support militant tendencies within existing unions. In 1976, Amada-TPO organized a national solidarity campaign for the reinstatement of FGTB shop steward Miel De Bruyne in the SIBP oil company. And when, in 1978, 250 workers and employees occupied the RBP oil refinery, they could count on the support of AMADA-TPO. For eleven long months, the occupiers struggled to keep the company going, in an effort that ultimately proved successful. In Wallonia, during the same period (1978), TPO played an important role in the strike of the FTA inter-communal electricity company, opposing the sacking of shop steward Louis Dujardin by the Socialist bosses (supported by André Cools, PS chairman at the time).

On January 3, 1976, a storm completely ravaged the dikes of the Scheldt river in Vliet, flooding the entire town of Ruisbroek.



Demonstration against discrimination and the expulsion of foreign workers, initiated by Amada and UCMLB, August 1974.



At the call of the united action group for nuclear shutdown, 22,000 demonstrators proclaimed: "Doel will be stopped", June 1979.

Town residents were angry and blamed King Baudouin for “finding 30 billion Belgian francs for aircraft flying noisily above our heads, but no money for the consolidation of dikes”. Dozens of young AMADA members helped residents clear away the rubble. This was also an example of “serving the people”. The party, however, remained a very small group. At its beginning, AMADA had dismissed elections as an “electoral carnival”, but in 1974, it nevertheless took up this battle. In the 1976 municipal elections, AMADA won 2.2% of the vote in Antwerp and 1.8% in Genk. Its best score was achieved in Hoboken, with 10% of the vote and 2 municipal councillors to boot. But this remained an exception, for, at the national level, the party failed to break through. In the parliamentary elections (for the House), AMADA-TPO obtained 0.4% in 1977 and 0.8% in 1978. Still, those results did not dampen the enthusiasm and commitment of the nascent young party. Those activists knew how difficult it was to build a new party in a highly polarized political landscape.

AMADA-TPO was not only concerned with workplace sections and international solidarity; it was also active in many other fields. In Hoboken, a major campaign took on the lead pollution caused by the factory *Métallurgie Hoboken*, nicknamed “the silver”. When test results established that local schoolchildren had too much lead in their blood, a large “action committee against lead poisoning” was set up in April 1978. Doctors for the People and AMADA mobilized within it, along with the parents of Moretusburg children, workers of *Métallurgie Hoboken*, Young Socialists, the four sections of the Hoboken KWB (Christian Workers’ Movement), the Oxfam World Solidarity store and local youth centres. Doctors for the People continued its effort against this severe pollution for years, until the Moretusburg district soil was finally cleansed at the expense of the Union Minière, a major shareholder of *Métallurgie Hoboken*. also in other initiatives, AMADA showed itself a forerunner in the protection of the environment and for a social and ecological urbanization. In the spring of 1979, the municipal authorities of Deurne (Antwerp) authorized construction of twelve-story blocks in a green area situated in the middle of the Arena District. Hundreds of local residents occupied the meadows of the Arena for months, published a mobilization bulletin (*t Arenake*, the “Little Arena”) and created Radio Arena, a propaganda tool that police forces proved unable to seize because



GEEN VYF NAAR EEN JAAR
ONZE KINDEREN

HOBOKEN
HOBOKEN
HOBOKEN

ONZE
KINDEREN
WILLEN
LEVEN

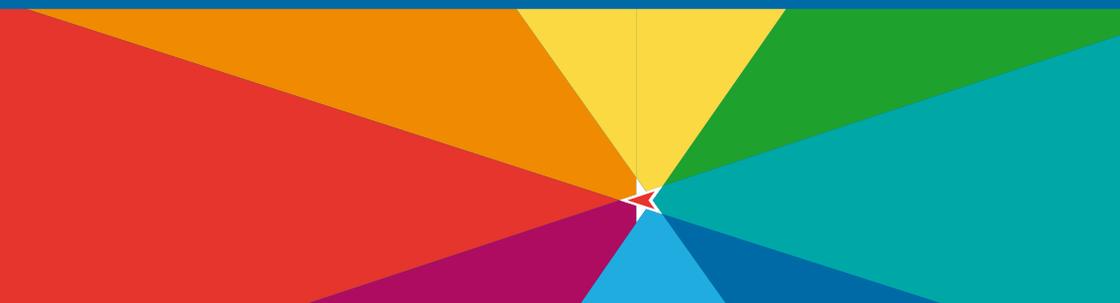
hoboken

Women take a stand at the gate of the Hoboken Metallurgy against lead poisoning, April 1978.

the transmitter changed position daily. Every night there were debates, artistic performances and lectures. Young AMADA militants were very active in supporting and organizing this campaign. On November 13, 1979, when the site was forcibly evacuated, there were 180 tents occupying the Arena meadow.

1979-1989

**DURING
THE NEOLIBERAL
YEARS**

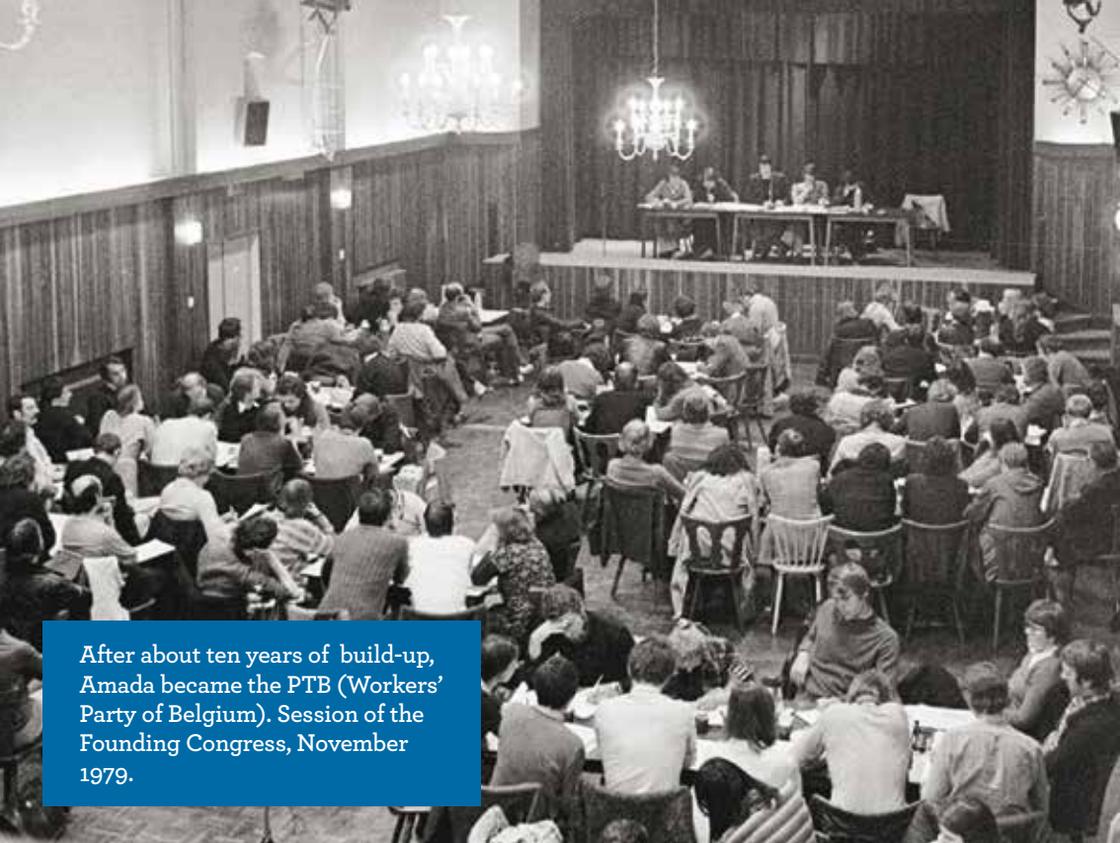


THE PTB WAS OFFICIALLY FOUNDED on November 4, 1979, at the Brussels Rogier Centre, after almost ten years of party building. Four thousand people attended its launching. During a series of preliminary meetings, delegates approved a programme consisting of two parts: one on socialism and another on a minimal programme for social progress, democracy, peace and national independence. The new party advocated in particular the nationalization of key sectors, as a reply to the problems of the population. Its intention was to become a real political force in Belgium and to discard the dogmatism and sectarianism of its initial years. AMADA-TPO evolved from a simple slogan to a political party inspired by all struggle movements and by all positive aspirations of workers and of progressives. At that point, the party decided to publish a bilingual weekly. Its name was no longer to be *Tout le pouvoir aux ouvriers*, but *Concret*. From 1982 on, it would be known as *Solidaire*. At its founding congress, the party approved new party rules concerning its structures: elected provincial and national leaders.

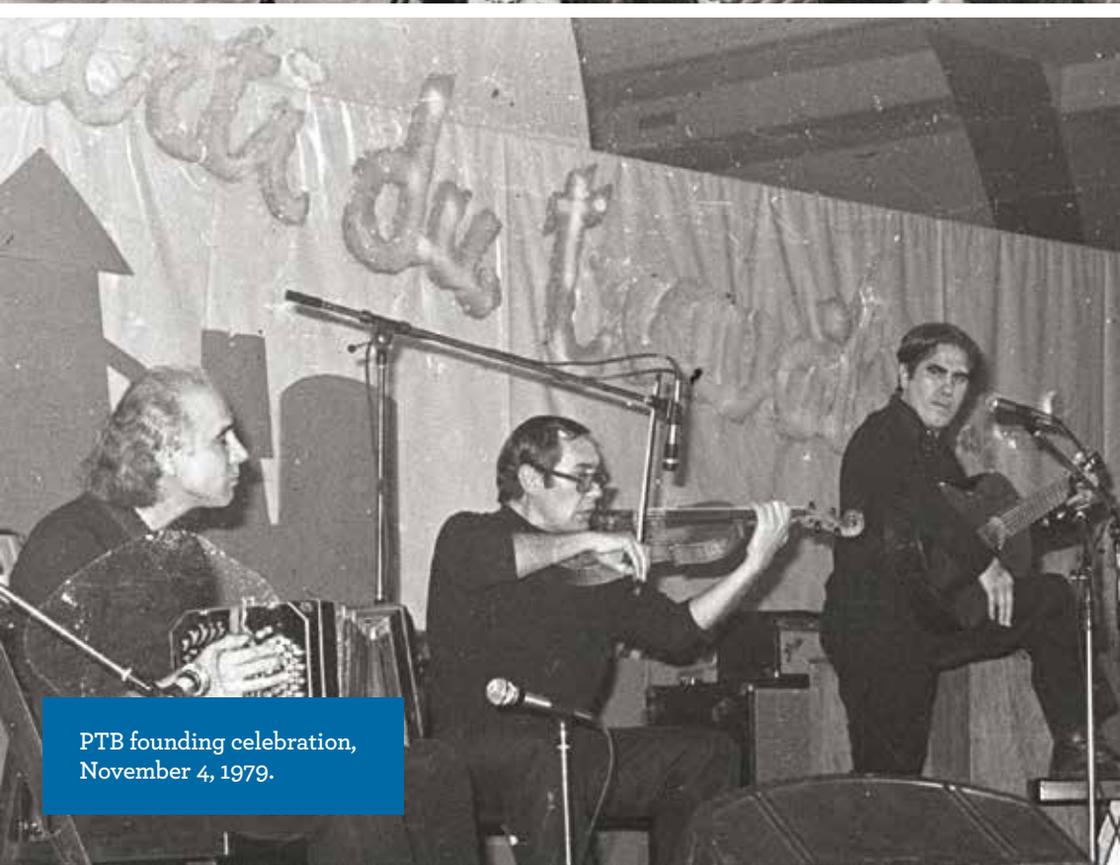
The oil crisis of 1973 revealed an overproduction crisis and caused a recession throughout the world. In the United Kingdom (1979), the US (1981) and West Germany (1982), conservative governments rose to power. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan applied the aggressive neoliberal economic policies of the Chicago School (Milton Friedman). During the previous decade, it had still been possible to extract wage increases. Starting from this time the labour movement resisted the dismantling of rights and previous gains, and the imposition of flexibility, social security restrictions, rationalizations, plant closures and rising unemployment. Meanwhile, in 1984, the whole of Germany experienced a major strike in metallurgical enterprises. German steelworkers demanded and won a 35-hour week.

Crisis conditions existed everywhere and the labour world was on the defensive. Some of the 1968 activists reneged on their commitment and, like Manuel Barroso², now aimed for a successful career within the system. Several Maoist parties dating back to May 68 were on the verge of disappearing. New theories came into vogue, such as “farewell to the working class”. The young leadership of PTB did not take this slippery path and, in 1983, organized a second orientation congress. Both at the ideological and organizational levels, the party confirmed

2 Manuel Barroso, a Portuguese politician who presided over the European Commission between 2004 and 2014.



After about ten years of build-up, Amada became the PTB (Workers' Party of Belgium). Session of the Founding Congress, November 1979.



PTB founding celebration, November 4, 1979.

its principles and thus strengthened the core of the organization. But attention was lent one-sidedly to this danger, and much less to the changing climate of the time. Everywhere in Europe and in the US, the popularity of the dynamics of change, born in May 68, was strongly diminishing. The change of direction initiated by the party leadership in 1976 that advocated true openness, concrete achievements, patience, supporting positive developments, prioritizing majority sentiments and creating a wide range of activities around concrete action took the back seat. This change of direction came to an end much too soon, as we would observe a quarter of a century later, in 1999. In addition, the party expressly stated that, in the circumstances, it could not be anything other than a “party of cadres” and therefore not a large “members’ party”. Cadres and militants had to meet stringent requirements. In addition to almost daily activist work in just about every social struggle, they devoted time and energy to study, thus strengthening the backbone of the party. However, these harsh membership criteria turned many people away, and party sympathizers were relegated to the “Friends of the Party” organization. Despite its good intentions, the PTB continued to suffer from sectarianism.

Politically, things were also grim. During the Cold War, the world often found itself hovering on the brink of a large-scale conflict. In the eighties, one theme dominated the news: the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The threat of war became even more tangible when the US stationed its Tomahawk and Pershing II missiles in Belgium. Peace organizations mobilized over 400,000 demonstrators against these missiles on October 23, 1983, for what proved to be a demonstration of a size hardly ever seen before. Peace activists believed that the nuclear winter they were warning against was dangerously close. Ever since its creation, the PTB had been critical of the many signs of degeneration of socialism in the Soviet Union and had become closer to China. The PTB had always remained independent vis-à-vis the latter, but the young party adopted without a critical spirit certain views of the Chinese. For this reason, quite some people would continue to refer to the PTB as “Amada”. One such problematic Chinese position relied on the famous Three Worlds Theory³, which declared the Soviet Union the most dangerous superpower. This erroneous analysis and theory really harmed the PTB. It resulted in a sectarian

3 According to the Three Worlds Theory, the two superpowers (the US and the Soviet Union) constituted the First World, the Soviet Union being the most dangerous superpower. All other capitalist countries formed the Second World. The Third World comprised all countries that were dominated by the First or Second worlds or that had managed to attain their freedom.



Mobilisation during abortion trials, Brussels, 1982.



On 23 October 1983, more than 300,000 demonstrators took to the streets against nuclear missiles.

attitude, condemning the members of the Communist Party (CP), progressives and liberation movements strictly on the basis of their position with regard to the Soviet Union. Many years would elapse before the party reconsidered this mistaken position.

In the meantime, other crucial issues became a driving force for the young party. “Serve the People”; “Dare to struggle, dare to win”; activists must be “like fish in water”; “Knowledge stems from practice”: those beautiful phrases reflecting ideals were put into practice; first, with the founding of new Doctors for the People medical centres, but also when the party moved into new national headquarters. In 1984, the party purchased the 171 Boulevard Lemonnier site in Brussels (the former site of the His Master’s Voice LP records factory) through a major support campaign which, in current figures, brought in no less than 340,000 euros. Hundreds of workers and young volunteers pitched in to set up the offices. This commitment and volunteer work was from the outset a hallmark of the PTB, which received no subsidies from the State or powerful financial groups. These principles maintained party health and guaranteed its independence. At the time, many people, rightly or wrongly, were uncomfortable with certain political positions of the young party, but appreciated such strong commitment and volunteer spirit.

During the eighties, Belgium had ten successive governments: nine led by Wilfried Martens and one with Mark Eyskens as prime minister. “The end of the tunnel is near,” promised Martens and Eyskens as they imposed their stabilization plans one after the other, with the added bonus of three index jumps between 1982 and 1984. From April to September 1981, 2,000 workers went on strike for five and a half months at Boel (Temse), standing together to oppose 128 lay-offs. A committee of 50 people, headed by the chief shop stewards Jan Cap (CSC) and José De Staelen (FGTB), led the strike.

In 1982, the Cockerill Yards shipyards, one of the PTB’s foremost bastions, closed down. The Walloon steel industry experienced deep restructuring. In early 1982, angry steelworkers demonstrated in Brussels. It was a time of major struggles with, in April 1982, the Great Youth March for Employment and a railroad and public services strike in September 1983. The terrorism of the Walloon Brabant gang of killers and the bomb attacks of the CCC⁴ created a climate of fear, which



Half a million solidarity leaflets, 100,000 euros and 62 meetings in support of British miners.



During the winter holidays of 1984, the PTB left with a truck full of support goods for miners in Kent.

was used to strengthen police forces and discredit social resistance. This did not prevent 200,000 people from taking to the streets in Brussels in 1986 in protest against the Martens-Gol austerity regime, called the Val-Duchesse plan. The PTB launched the slogan “Make the rich pay for the crisis”. On May 1, 1985, Jan Cap, the charismatic chief shop steward of Boel Shipyards (Temse), joined the party.

Between March 1984 and May 1985, 140,000 miners went on strike in Britain against the pit closures announced by the Thatcher regime. Throughout Belgium, members of the PTB mobilized in active support. They distributed half a million solidarity-leaflets, organized 62 support meetings, raised 100,000 euros and organized 29 solidarity visits to Britain. Party members showed their heart of gold. During the Easter vacation of 1985, the Limburg section of the party warmly welcomed some twenty children of British miners in families in Genk. “*La mia casa è la tua casa*” (My house is your house), as the saying goes. A little later, between 1986 and 1989, the last “black gold” coalmines of Limburg, the province’s main economic resource, also closed down, despite the miners’ exemplary resistance. On the Waterschei picket lines, a new symbol of the combative trade union made its appearance: the red and green scarf. Thousands were produced, literally setting fire to the sewing machines. With its presence in the trade unions, the influence of the PTB increased within social movements, to the dismay of the ruling class. “The phenomenon of extreme left agitators is arising in almost all large industrial concerns”, wrote the daily newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg*.

In the South, the liberation struggle was making significant progress in Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa and Palestine. The party supported a broad campaign of solidarity with Sandinista Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador, where, in 1987, Dr. Michaël De Witte was to lose his life. The party supported Mandela’s ANC in South Africa in its struggle against the apartheid regime as it did the PLO of Yasser Arafat, in Palestine. In 1988-1989, Dr. Jan Cools from Antwerp was held hostage in Lebanon for 13 months. A new organization, Medical Aid for the Third World, was set up along the lines of Doctors for the People. The PTB thus evolved from one social intervention to another, applauded by those whose interests it defended, reviled by most of its political and social opponents.

Red Youth (Rebelle) at the youth march for employment, Brussels, May 1984.



Waterschei miners go to Genk in demonstration, September 1984.

In 1988, hundreds of PTB delegates met again for the party's Third Congress, the Trade Union Congress. The congress took stock of the struggle movements of the eighties and made a strong plea in favour of activist trade unionism, with due respect for unity with labour unions. The congress also dealt with the internationalization of the economy, the rise of new technologies and the new composition of the working class.

Despite its dogmatic and sectarian aspects, the PTB has always been a party of the working class. But it failed to transfer to the electoral level the influence it had acquired in the labour world. Major campaigns attempted to elect a Member of Parliament but did not succeed. In 1985, the last two Communist Party MPs disappeared from Parliament, while in the district of Antwerp, the PTB obtained some 2.8% of votes and maintained, at national level, its 0.7 % score of ten years earlier. The party would have to wait another thirty years before landing a first seat in Parliament.



Dr. Harrie arrested in Genk. Neighbours and patients hold their children, February 1985.



Mobilization of patients against the seizure of the furniture of Drs. Lieve and Johan in Herstal, 1983.



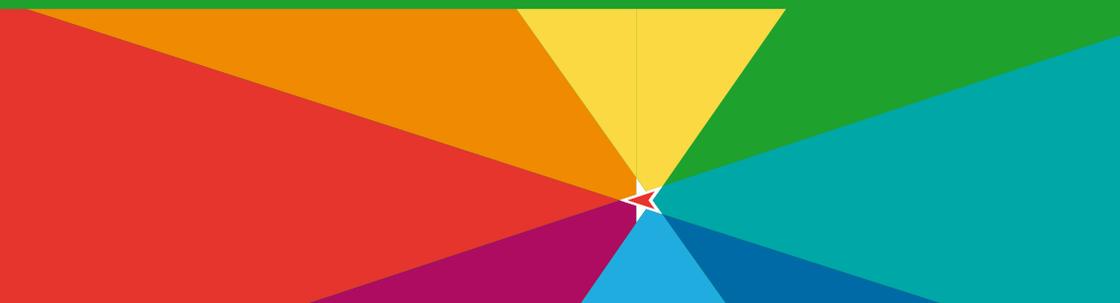
Demonstration in support of the Sandinista revolution and against the growing US aggression in Central America, June 1985



Dr. Jan Cools (rear left) working in a Palestinian refugee camp, 1988. Later, he was taken hostage in Lebanon and released only 13 months later.

1989-1999

**A CHANGING
WORLD**



ON MARCH 23, a decisive battle against apartheid unfolded in Cuito Cuanavale, Angola. Angola (MPLA) and Namibia (SWAPO) prevailed, helped by tens of thousands of Cuban volunteers. Nelson Mandela declared this battle “the turning point for the liberation of our continent and my people from the scourge of apartheid”. With the defeat of the racists and of their American mentors, the South African occupation of Namibia was dealt a fatal blow. The defeat accelerated the start of negotiations with the ANC which would soon afterwards finally overcome the racist regime of South Africa.

The world was changing rapidly. In 1987, the PTB began questioning its earlier assessment of the Soviet Union. The theory of “the most dangerous superpower” was wrong: the Soviet armies withdrew under duress from Afghanistan, and the Moscow regime collapsed like a cheese soufflé. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989. In other Eastern European countries, we were also witnessing the overthrow of an ailing socialism, which gave way to unbridled capitalism. The fall of socialism in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe was associated with euphoria for capitalism and a hysterically anti-communist campaign. “This is the end of history, liberalism has triumphed for good,” exclaimed Fukuyama. The largest communist party of Western Europe, the Italian PCI, morphed into a social-democratic party. From 1997 on, it would co-lead the Italian government after a major shift to neoliberal values. In our own country, certain pundits believed that the history of the PTB must end, and the party was under severe pressure.

At its Fourth Congress (1991), the party engaged in a first analysis of the fall of the Soviet Union and of the new world order that had surfaced since then. The party faced two major tasks: it must revise its own analysis of the Soviet Union, an analysis hitherto heavily influenced by China, but that had been manifestly proved incorrect. Concurrently, it must assess the system taking its place and its significance for the worldwide emancipation struggle. It was largely in the ensuing period that the party acquired the reputation of being an almost uncritical defender of Soviet Union history, without any nuances. One cannot underrate the achievements of the Soviet Union in education, health, science and culture, nor its decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany. But it is clear that the USSR had significant problems, not only in bureaucracy, but in abuses of power, economic stagnation and criminal interventions against

Six South African youths were sentenced to death in the Sharpeville Six trial. Meeting with the family, February 1988.



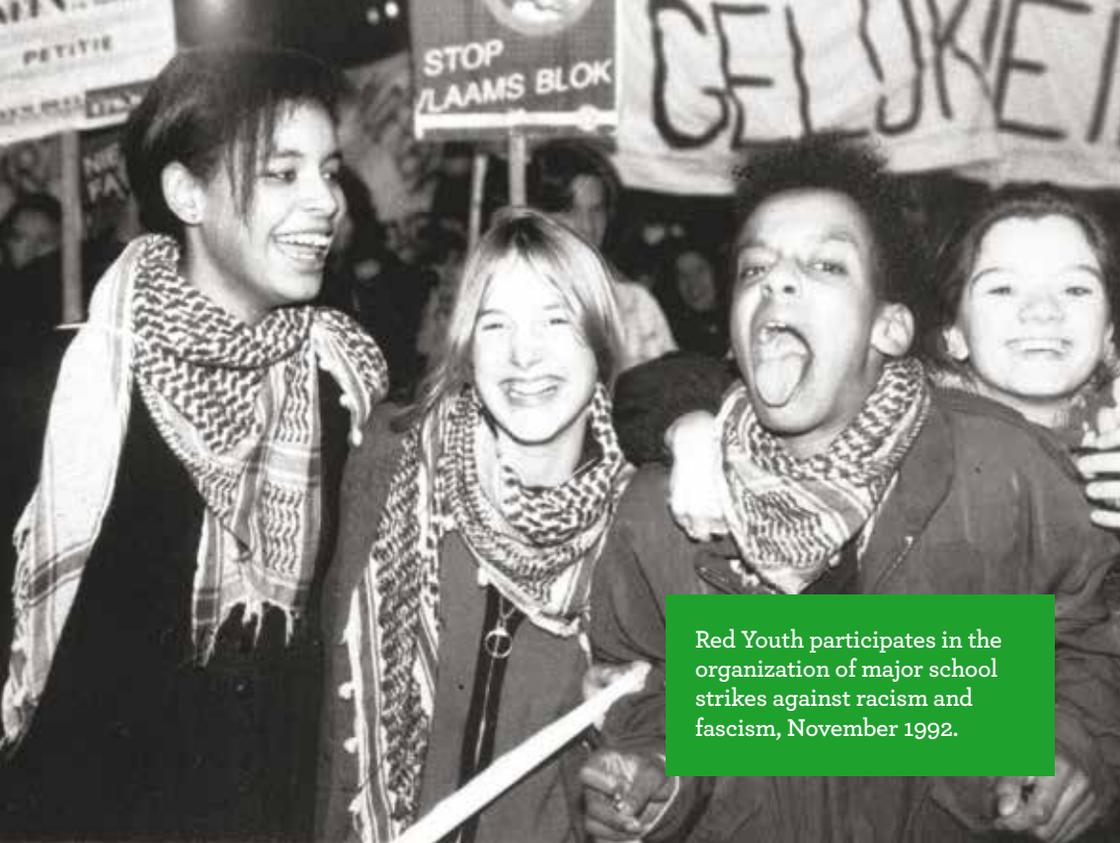
Mass demonstration in Brussels against the first Gulf War against Iraq, 1991.

real or perceived opponents of the regime. In the second half of the 20th century, socialism would continue to degenerate in the USSR, getting trapped in ever more bureaucracy and formalism, up to its overthrow in the “velvet counter-revolution” of 1989-1991.

In 1991, capitalism supporters hoped that the overthrow of socialism would bring relief to the crisis that dragged on, but the opposite was true. The Warsaw Pact fell apart, NATO was thriving and launched a series of new wars of aggression, starting with Iraq (1991). The PTB fully supported the peace movement, and in January, tens of thousands took to the streets in Brussels.

Ultrationalist forces tore Yugoslavia apart and, throughout Eastern Europe, neo-fascist organizations sprang up like mushrooms. Racist violence was increasing, with pogroms against refugees in places like Rostock (East Germany). In France, the Front National was gaining ground, as was the MSI in Italy. In our own country, on the Black Sunday of November 24, 1991, the Vlaams Blok obtained a record number of votes. Shocked, high school students went on strike against racism, with the active support of Rebelle, as the PTB youth movement was called at the time. Many progressives, including representatives of the PTB, launched the “Objective 479,917” petition in favour of equal rights and automatic naturalization after five years of legal residence. The aim was to collect as many signatures as the far Right had obtained votes. The campaign on this theme lasted more than two years and harvested a million signatures. Racism had yet to be defeated, but by conducting tens of thousands of discussions in all settings, the goal of laying the foundations for a security cordon around the fascist parties, proposed among others by the Hand in Hand action committee, was achieved. The Vlaams Blok fascists were effectively kept from accessing power anywhere. The PTB was unable, however, to prevent the progression of the far Right in the traditionally Red neighbourhoods. The disgust of social democracy benefited the far Right and not the PTB, which had not enough influence in working-class districts and remained perceived as too sectarian.

In Maastricht, in February 1992, EU leaders renamed the European Community European Union, and decided to create a European super-state with a common currency, the Euro. Member states faced drastically



Red Youth participates in the organization of major school strikes against racism and fascism, November 1992.



Young people commemorate the victory over fascism, Breendonk, May 8, 1993.

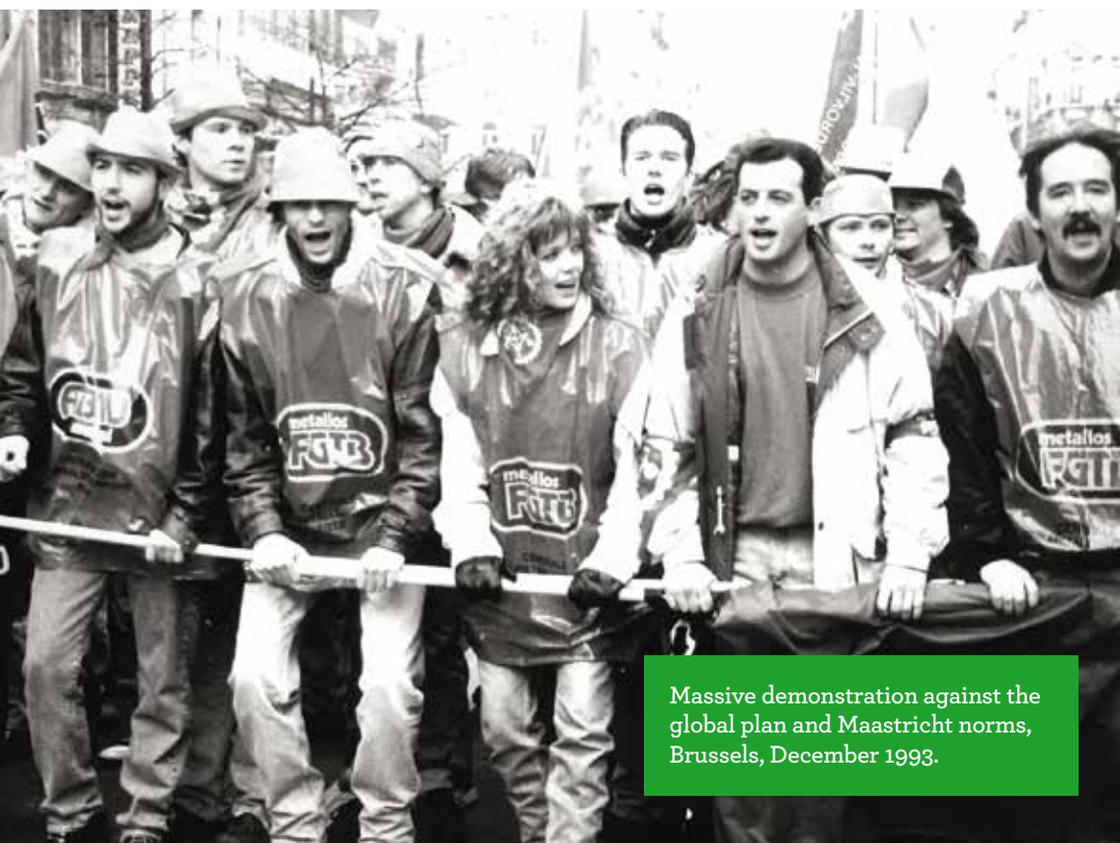
restrictive criteria, and the PTB was the only party in Belgium which criticized this project. In December 1993, in the midst of a turbulent period of trade union resistance, it organized a Euro-Stop event in Brussels. On October 24, 1993, the Social Democrat and Christian Democrat Dehaene government announced its Global Plan, whose menu included a wage freeze, manipulation of the health index, reductions in social security contributions by employers, an increase of the Value-Added Tax and restrictions of 1.9 billion euros on social security. The plan corresponded to the guidelines of the Maastricht criteria. Upon the announcement of these measures, a spontaneous strike broke out in Cockerill-Sambre, in Charleroi. The FGTB called for a national demonstration in Brussels, in which 70,000 people took part. The PTB was active throughout the country in the protest movement. In November, the joint trade union front CSC-FGTB organized three Fridays of general strikes. On November 26, the whole country ground to a halt. Nevertheless, the plan was applied. The government also liberalized Belgacom and subsequently sold the CGER⁵ to Maurice Lippens. The Agusta scandal broke out in 1993: Social-Democrat ministers had accepted bribes from the arms industry to influence their choice of military helicopter purchases. In the European elections of 1994, the PTB obtained 60,000 votes, or exactly 1%.

The Fifth PTB Congress (1995) engaged in introspection. In the meantime, the world had undergone deep changes. The congress called for a greater sense of responsibility of its cadre, more political and tactical efforts and an in-depth rectification away from bureaucracy in order to adapt the party to the new reality. The aim was also for the pioneers of 1968 to pass on the torch to a new generation, but this didn't succeed yet. The Congress remained focused on the party itself; it produced no analysis of the political situation in our country six years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There was much "cut-and-pasting" of past operating principles, with little regard for a critical appraisal of the new situation. Very little was done to develop a programme based on people's needs and to define a new strategy and new tactics corresponding to the new era. Minds were not yet ripe for a new approach, which would only surface in 1999 and truly make headway at the Renewal Congress of 2008. This is not to say that the PTB avoided various struggle movements. Quite the contrary.

⁵ Caisse Générale d'Épargne et de Retraite, created in 1865 as a public institution, but completely privatized in 1998 and absorbed by the Fortis Bank, today a branch of BNP Paribas Fortis.



In October 1992, the workers occupied the Boel shipyard in Temse.



Massive demonstration against the global plan and Maastricht norms, Brussels, December 1993.

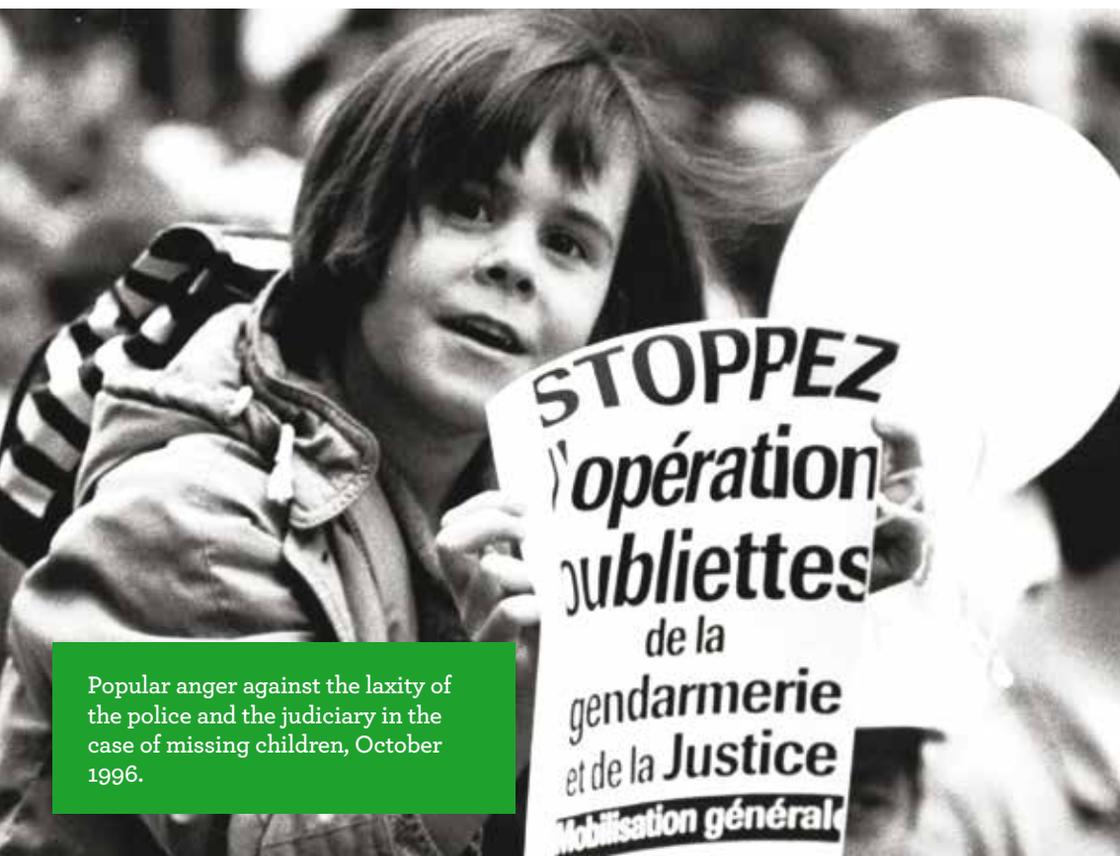
“Among the people” remained its motto, and the great movement that swept the education world in French-speaking Belgium between 1994 and 1996 became its first test. During the teachers’ strikes in schools and universities, youth and student PTB organizations made great steps forward. Then, in the summer of 1996, the police arrested Marc Dutroux, an event which sent a shock wave through the country. The party opposed a strictly “economist” worldview, only interested in the social and economic struggle, and joined up with the *Comités Blancs* (White Committees). On October 20, 1996, 300,000 people came to Brussels to attend one of the largest demonstrations of post-war times.

Since its inception, the PTB had supported nationalist and revolutionary forces in the former Belgian colony of the Congo. After the Rwanda genocide (1994), the party launched a massive humanitarian campaign. In 1997, when the Congolese chased off the dictator Mobutu, the party also organized a solidarity campaign with the new Congo. Solidarity links also developed with other liberation movements, with a full range of projects, campaigns, travel and tours. For instance, solidarity with Cuba became a priority in 1994.

Meanwhile, the economic crisis continued. In 1996, the closure of the steel factory Forges de Clabecq was announced. The PTB supported the steelworkers’ struggle and on February 2, 1997, over 70,000 people demonstrated their solidarity with the steelworkers with a March for Jobs in Tubize. A few weeks later, the announced closure of Renault Vilvoorde signalled the beginning of the dismantling of almost the entire automotive sector in our country. The PTB remained very active in struggles, but continued to slip towards sectarian and dogmatic positions. The strategy of confronting labour unions resurfaced, with a jettisoning of every item adopted at the 1988 Trade Union Congress. The party showed intractable rigidity on other topics too. At its Sixth Congress (1998), it turned further inward with the result that, in the 1999 elections, after thirty years of activism, it recorded its worst result ever with 0.6% of votes. Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the PTB was on the verge of an internal crisis.



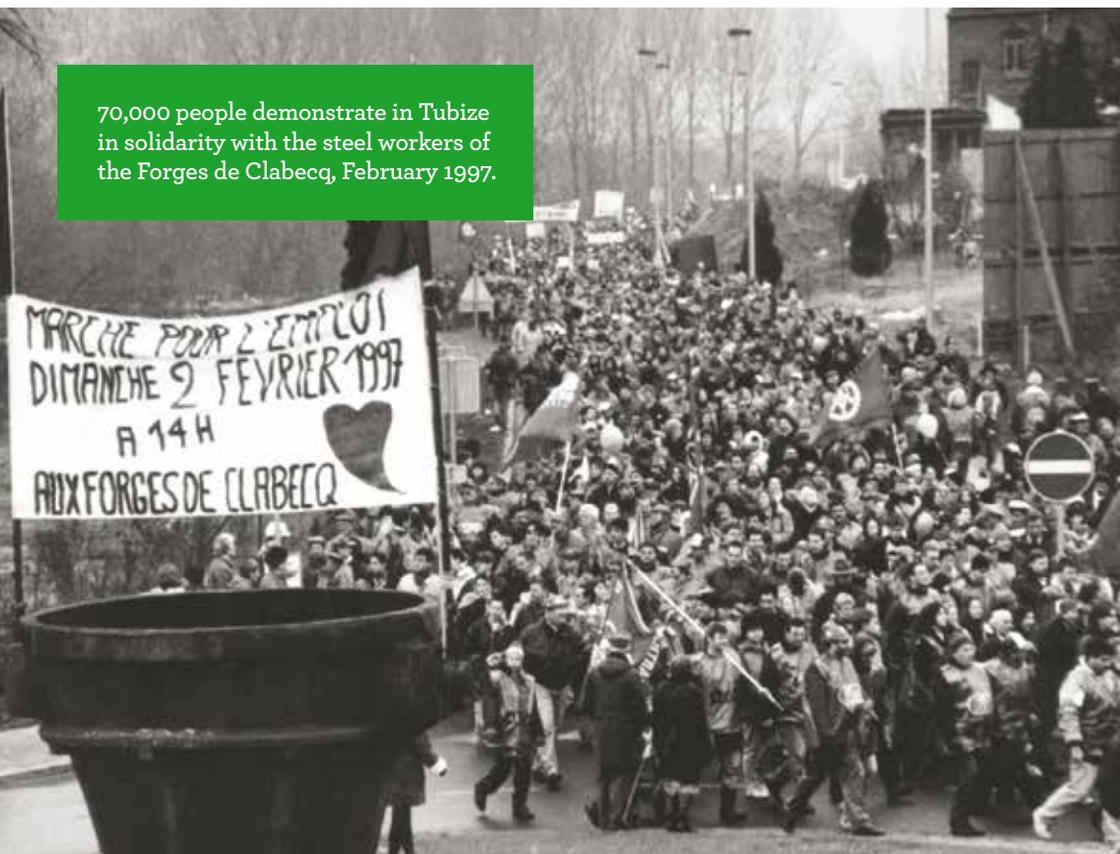
Solidarity campaign for the reconstruction of Rwanda, after the appalling genocide, 1994.



Popular anger against the laxity of the police and the judiciary in the case of missing children, October 1996.



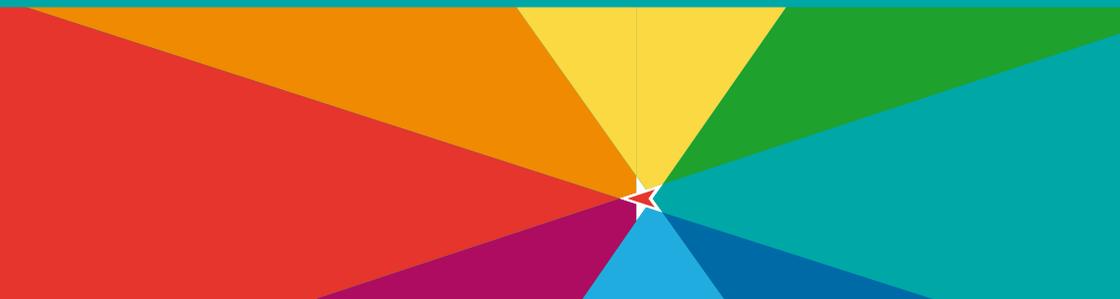
High school students in solidarity with their teachers in the major strike of education, March-April 1996.



70,000 people demonstrate in Tubize in solidarity with the steel workers of the Forges de Clabecq, February 1997.

1999-2008

**FROM PARTY
CRISIS TO
RENEWAL**



“THE ELECTIONS ARE A MAJOR POLITICAL DEFEAT for the party, a defeat which speaks for errors that have accumulated over many years.” Such was the assessment of the party leadership about this electoral setback. The debate was sharp because these errors and sectarian conceptions had persisted in the organization for over twenty years. “The comrades who defended the most leftist and sectarian attitudes should be the first to question certain party habits. The electoral defeat should at least force them to think. Instead, we see the opposite happening, with very little energy spent perusing our faults and weaknesses.” These words were harsh but justified.

A broad survey canvassed party supporters. Fighting spirit, enthusiasm, commitment, idealism, initiatives such as Doctors for the People and the working-class character of the party emerged in its results as salient points. At the same time, it became clear that our own supporters were increasingly disturbed by sectarianism, overly rigid thinking, lack of nuance, dogmatism and sloganeering, preachy tones, lack of humour, too many demands from the organization and a too restricted action terrain. The party faced a stern mirror.

The municipal elections of 2000 showed a small breakthrough, with two representatives elected in Zelzate, two in Herstal and one in Hoboken. Hundreds of surveys had enabled municipal programmes to be drawn up that reflected people’s hopes. In the summer of 2001, hundreds of thousands of trade-unionists, youth and activists gathered in Genua to denounce capitalist globalization. The PTB’s youth movement launched its campaign *Change the World*.

But on September 11, 2001, when two planes collided with the World Trade Center skyscrapers and a global fight against terrorism was announced, discussion started all over again with even more virulence within the party, at the time being led by the general secretary. Under the influence of trendy ideologues such as Negri and Hardt, the party distanced itself further from the working class. It took the daily problems of the people less and less into account, with everything being subordinated to the struggle against US aggression. Instead of supporting a broad social resistance against the new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the PTB opted for confrontation by creating a radical anti-war coalition, StopUSA. Party structures tottered and it was mainly the



Problem, big or small? The PTB is handling it. A lot of people at the Herstal town council in protest against the fire danger in the apartment blocks, 2002.



In Zelzate, the Tour de Frans becomes an annual three-day event, a neighbourhood festival, with bike rides, fairs, artists, raffles and flea markets. Here in 2002.

provincial leaderships, labour sectors and the high school movement that paid the price. This is what constituted the essence of the Seventh Congress in 2002. It is clear that no real consensus existed about the lessons of the 1999 defeat. There was an elitist conception of the party among people who thought they knew everything better than others, and who cared very little for practice.

This radicalistic confrontation strategy reached a new peak with the Resist electoral alliance, in 2003, a slate comprising the PTB and the Arab European League (AEL). Compared to 1999, the party lost another 71% of its votes in Flanders. Impossible to go lower...

This led to a severe crisis within the national leadership. The time had come to throw all windows wide open and let in a breath of fresh air, as the PTB could not go on this way. Such was the opinion of most of the party's rank and file, harshly critical of the party leadership. The latter made a self-critical assessment of the situation, rejecting the elitist tendency to turn our backs on the labour world. It criticized leftism and dogmatism, confrontational strategy and lack of interest in the material problems people were facing. Gathered around the General Secretary, a handful of cadres refuse to change course. After a sad period of factionalism and division, these diehard leftists were eventually excluded from the PTB. In late 2003 and early 2004, a new leadership, composed of young cadres, but also including first generation cadres, gradually worked at breathing new life into the party. It was not before time. Finally, in 2004, Doctors for the People launched their "Kiwi campaign" in favour of inexpensive prescription drugs. This was a first major campaign in favour of the everyday needs of society. It was also the beginning of a renewal movement in the PTB, ending the sectarian and dogmatic aspects of the previous twenty years.

The crisis in the party was in fact what made this profound change possible. And necessary as well, for in the meantime the social democratic parties had gradually drifted toward the centre, being taken along by the new neoliberal offensive. Di Rupo, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Telecommunications, described privatizations as a "strategic consolidation" and, in August 1999, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder launched *Die Neue Mitte*, or the Third Way, a manifesto that preached the modernization of social democracy through embracing

After Genoa, the PTB youth movement launches its CHEnge the world campaign, October 2001.



some aspects of neoliberalism. In 2002, with a government made up of Social Democrats and Greens, Schröder applied his programme in Germany, creating a large low-wage sector, the famous “mini-jobs”.

On October 28, 2005, 100,000 workers demonstrated in Brussels against the pension reform of the Verhofstadt II government. At the congress of SP.A (the Flemish Socialist Party), hundreds of trade unionists literally turned their backs on social democracy. The PTB was regaining credit in the trade unions, now that it had finally abandoned its pedantic and irritating confrontation line. Membership conditions were eased and hundreds of trade unionists became members of a PTB in full revival mode. Their input and experience would be very important for the continuation of the party’s renewal movement. This was an essential step in the transformation of a cadre party into a members’ party.

In the 2006 municipal elections, the party’s change of direction resulted in the election of 15 local representatives in six towns. In Zelzate, the party rose to over 21%; in Hoboken and in Herstal, it exceeded 8% and in Deurne, Seraing, Lommel, Genk and La Louvière, the party obtained its first representatives. Until 2007, the party’s wind of renewal went on being discussed in numerous debates, and with our many new members. The reorientation won increasing approval, but also faced some reluctance. In late 2007, the party had 2,800 members and, after four years of discussion, the PTB felt ready to lay out new orientations with its Renewal Congress (2008). *A principled party, a flexible party, a party of the workers*, is the title of this congress orientation document.

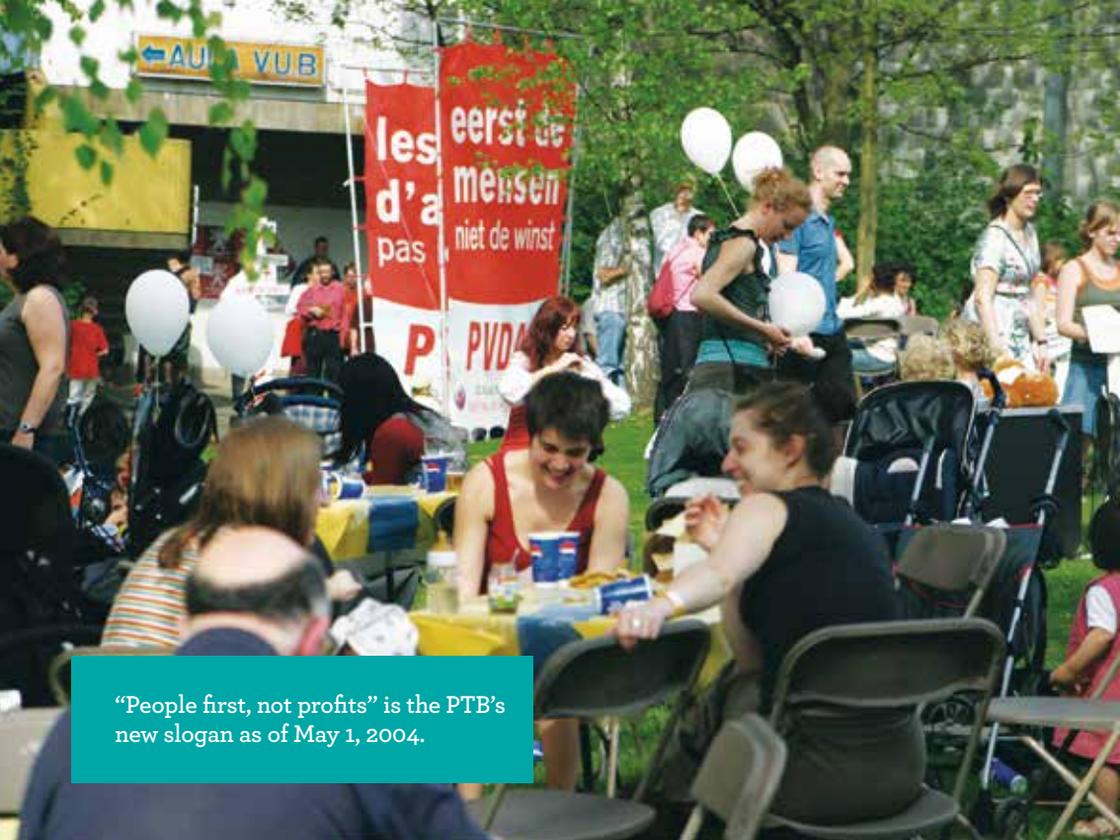
The PTB is a party of the working class in the broad sense, a party of the 21st century, a party that is firm on its principles, based on Marxism and aiming for socialism, and a party that applies a number of basic principles of tactics in order to better conscientize, organize and mobilize. The Renewal Congress also elected a new National Council, with numerous new responsables, ready to take on their tasks.



In 2004, Medicine for the People launched the Kiwi model for cheaper medicines.



Hundreds of thousands of trade unionists demonstrate against pension plans, October 2005.



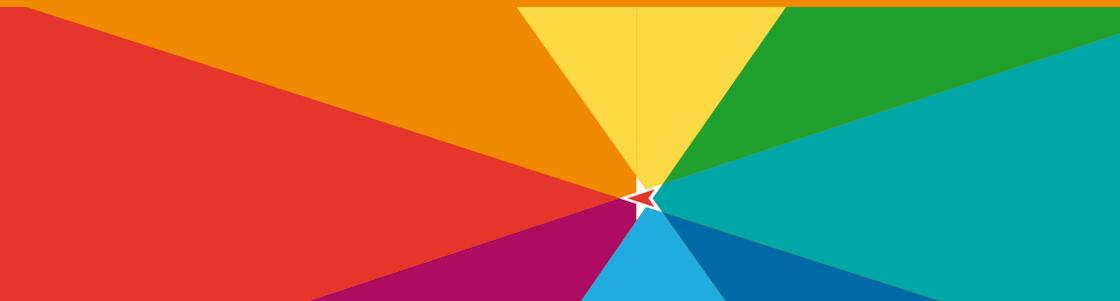
"People first, not profits" is the PTB's new slogan as of May 1, 2004.



The PTB is distributing potatoes to denounce the decline in purchasing power, at a trade union demonstration in December 2007.

2008-2016

**FROM RENEWAL
TO THE PRESENT
DAY**



THE NEW TEAM elected at the Renewal Congress is immediately confronted with the 2008 banking fiasco, as the manifestation of the deep economic crisis of overproduction. In the European Union, this crisis brings about another one, the euro crisis in 2011. This leads to a deep social unrest in Europe where ten million workers are losing their jobs. The European establishment, under the leadership of the German hawks, pursues a harsh austerity policy, with great economic and social violence in the peripheral countries (Greece, Ireland, Portugal), but with harsh austerity measures elsewhere in the Union as well. There are mass movements of young people and trade unions everywhere that reject austerity. In our country, the workers' movement is taking to the streets in 2010 and 2011. The PTB is very active in this resistance and is launching its campaign for a millionaire's tax. The book *How dare they? The crisis, the euro and the big hold up* is a best seller and its Dutch version dominates the top 10 non-fiction books for more than a year.

The authoritarian intervention of the European establishment also provokes a reaction from the other side. Nationalism and separatism are spreading all over the old continent and, between 2009 and 2010, the political blockade of our country by the separatists leads to the longest institutional crisis in the history of Belgium. The 2010 federal elections see the breakthrough of the right-wing separatist N-VA. Since a long time, the PTB has been the only national party in the Belgian political landscape, active in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. The party actively supports the *Save Solidarity* movement and publishes the brochure *Wij zijn één, nous sommes un* ('We are one').

The 2011 popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt give some hope, but the Arab spring is rapidly changing direction with the intervention of reactionary and international forces. In 2011, the PTB is alone in opposing a new Western intervention in Libya. All the other parties in the country are in favour. The same configuration will be used during the military intervention in Syria. The entire Middle East region is destabilized and this fuels the right-wing fundamentalism of the terrorist jihad. Jihad terrorist attacks are also hitting European cities and a new climate of fear is providing fertile ground for the far right. At the same time, the flow of refugees fleeing the new wars is mounting. With the *Friendship Without Borders* platform, the PTB organizes solidarity.



Seven thousand people participate in the Protest Parade against the new right-wing government, 19 October 2014.

On the organizational level, the PTB continues to grow, reaching more than 8,500 members at the Solidarity Congress in 2015. The party now has many more grassroots branches, among the workers as well. The provincial and departmental leaderships have been renewed and rejuvenated and the studies department has continued to be developed, building a reputation for its strong track record on taxation, energy, health care, pensions, public services and democratic rights. The most successful campaign is the campaign against expensive energy, which will initially lead to a reduction in VAT on electricity in 2014 and, in Flanders, to the abolition of the hated ‘Turteltaks’⁶. At the same time, an environmental working group is being set up to develop the *Red is the new green* campaign to characterize the climate problem as a system issue. The party’s growth also strengthens its intervention force in various areas. On a stormy Saturday, September 25, 2010 in Bredene-sur-mer, the weekly magazine *Solidaire* and the people’s clinics of *Medicine for the People* are organizing for the first time a major solidarity festival: *ManiFiesta*. It will become the most important place of solidarity in the country, with a very diverse audience.

During the 2012 municipal elections, the PTB makes its first breakthrough in two major cities: Antwerp and Liège. In total, the party now has 52 local representatives. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the PTB received 240,000 votes and for the first time two federal deputies. It also earned two Walloon parliamentarians and four Brussels parliamentarians. This is the first time in thirty years that there are Marxists in parliament again.

When the new right-wing government announces its austerity measures in autumn 2014, discontent grows visibly. Across the country, the PTB is active to support the movement. On 6 November 2014, 120,000 militant trade unionists demonstrate in the streets of Brussels, with the support of the citizen movements *Hart boven Hard* (‘Heart above Hard’) and *Tout Autre Chose* (‘Something entirely different’), in collaboration with hundreds of social organisations. A provincial strike will follow and on December 15, the strike is general. The right-wing government is wavering but holds its ground.

6 A flat tax of 100 euros on electricity use imposed on consumers in Flanders in 2005.



In Bredene-sur-mer, ManiFiesta has become the country's largest solidarity festival.

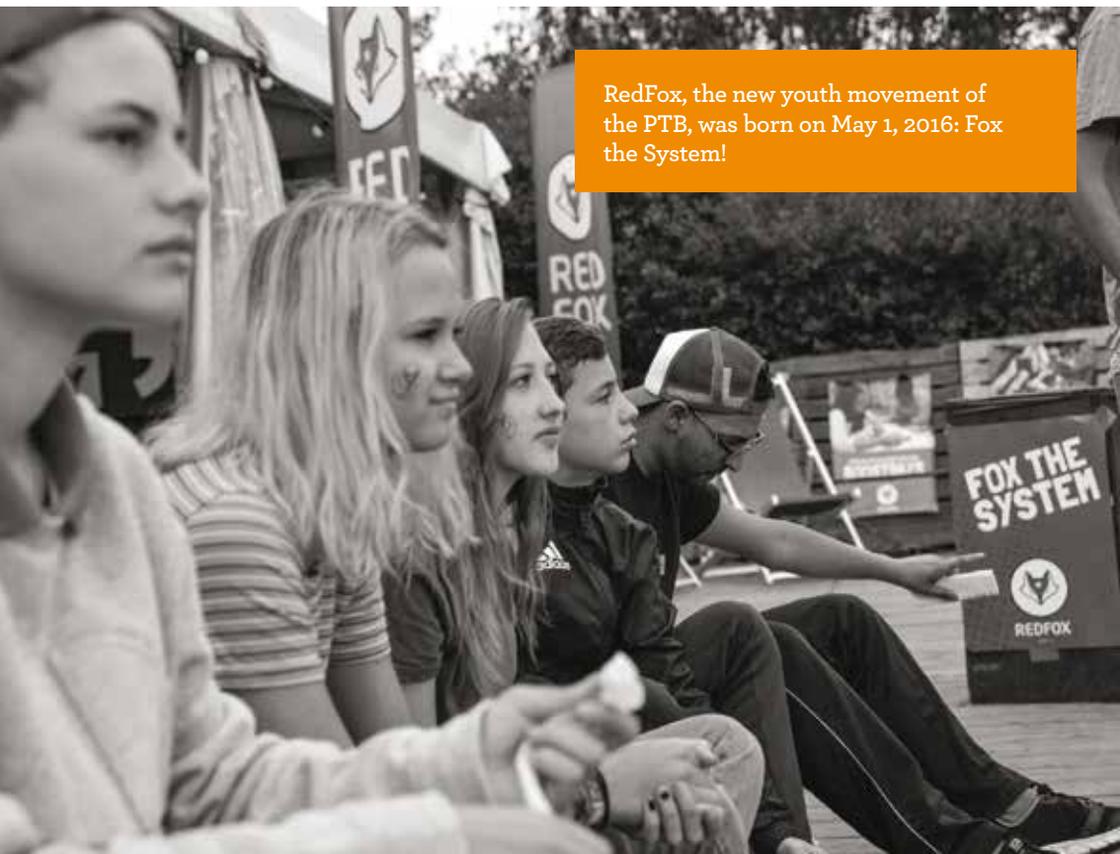


After years of campaigning, the PTB succeeds in having the hated Turteltaks on electricity consumption abolished.

In mid-2015, at the Solidarity Congress, more than 500 delegates from grassroots party branches analyze the new global situation. It is a question of broadening the themes and linking them. We are looking for an answer to the economic crisis, the growing threat of war, racism and nationalism, the climate crisis. But we also need to deepen, say the congress delegates, and we update in ten points the vision of socialism under the name of Socialism 2.0. The party logo changes: in the star, the arrow turns green and, in addition to the basic red flags, the PTB also equips itself with multi colored banners that express the link between the different social movements. In 2015, the in-depth renovation of the party's headquarters will be completed: the old record factory will be given a new outfit, with lots of air, light and greenery. And it's more than ever a buzzing hive. In 2016, a new full-fledged youth organisation, RedFox, is founded alongside the student movement Comac. And in the fall of 2016, the PTB welcomes its ten thousandth member: Ilse, a young nurse from Lier.



Two thousand people are attending the closing session of the Solidarity Congress at the Heysel in Brussels on 13 June 2015.



RedFox, the new youth movement of the PTB, was born on May 1, 2016: Fox the System!

The PTB launches the Red is the New Green campaign at the Climate Summit in September 2015.



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