

How to Get... What You Want

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The history of the struggles that won the present type of suffrage in Belgium is interesting and very instructive. It shows how, through vigor and constancy associated with caution, a popular party managed, in the space of a few years, to bring a selfish, arrogant class to surrender, even though that class was determined to resist every concession and could call upon the economic and military might of the entire nation in the defense of its privileges. And this history might serve as an example for further struggles targeting much more effective gains for the good of the people.

Avanti! has received from its Belgian correspondent (A. Dewinne) an account of those events, which we know to be truthful. We think it might be useful to reprint it here, summarizing some points for reasons of space, after which we shall offer our own observations.

From 1831 to 1893, Belgium had an electoral arrangement referred to as census suffrage. In order to qualify for the vote, one had to pay a poll tax levy, which after the '48 riots was reduced to 42.32 Italian lire.

The levy was ordained by the Constitution, which can only be changed with the consensus of two-thirds of the members of Parliament, and the king's endorsement. Therefore, since it could not be expected for the bourgeoisie to be sufficiently self-sacrificing as to renounce its political privileges, electoral reform looked unattainable by legal means.

For 20 years, the radicals pressed for a revision of Article 47 of the constitution prescribing the poll tax levy. In 1870 they stood 4 candidates in Brussels and were defeated. Some radicals, elected in the provinces, proposed the revision but the Chamber refused to give it any consideration.

In 1881, Janson, the leader of the radical party, moved that the administrative vote be widened to include all who had reached the age of 21 and who could read and write; but, coming under attack in the Catholic and Liberal press and showered with insults, he withdrew that motion. "Ability to read and write" remained the radicals' formula, up until the emergence of the workers' party that forced them into campaigning for universal suffrage.

In 1883, Janson again moved a revision of Article 47, and the motion, after a stormy debate, garnered only 11 votes, with 116 against.

In 1884, the Belgian Workers' Party was founded in Antwerp, and instead of asking the bourgeois sitting in Parliament to grant workers the vote, the Belgian socialists addressed the workers directly, organizing them on a sound economic footing.

In 1885, at the party congress held in Ghent, Dr. César de Paepe, the most intelligent Belgian socialist, first launched the idea of the general strike in order to secure universal suffrage—an idea that was enthusiastically embraced by the Walloon workers.

The following year, formidable strikes erupted among the miners of the Borinage, Liege, and Charleroi; the strikers demanded better pay and universal suffrage. Violence broke out pretty much everywhere; armed mobs roamed the Charleroi basin, smashing up machinery, looting offices, and torching castles.

The repression was terrible. Troops opened fire on the strikers, there were many dead, and a great number of mass arrests were made.

Once calm had returned, the ferocity exhibited by the bourgeoisie was proportional to its earlier scare. The courts were merciless, and frequent sentences rained down on the poor rebels.

The entire bourgeoisie realized that there was a lesson to be learned from these events. In fact, 1886 marks the beginning of the first social legislation, behind which the Catholic government today shields itself, but which they granted only out of fear of fresh upheavals. And so the regulation of female and child labor began. Just a little bit, though! Yet for the previous half century it had not even been a consideration.

However, the government remained hostile to any revision of the Constitution and, above all, to universal suffrage.

The following year, the Workers' Party debated whether or not the threat of a general strike should be carried out. A party congress was convened to decide, and the debates were very animated.

The miners' delegates wanted work abandoned immediately; other delegates, especially the ones from Brussels and Ghent, vigorously opposed the idea of a general strike, finding it premature and the preparations inadequate. The congress rejected the proposal by a slight majority.

The miners' delegates walked out, declaring that they would ignore the decision made and promote the strike.

And so the Workers' Party was split into two factions.

The dissidents held a new congress and a general strike was approved.

Within days, thousands of miners struck. The disturbances, violence and riots of 1886 resumed. In the mining basins in Hainaut revolvers were fired and dynamite bombs were going off pretty much everywhere.

The government dispatched its most terrifying butcher, General Vandersmissen to the strike area with absolute powers. When it came to the crackdown, this sabre-rattler was ruthless; he ordered his troops to open fire on the strikers without—as required by law—issuing any warning first.

In that instance, a great number of soldiers, worked up by the socialist propaganda, fired blanks; this was a serious choice, for which they could be shot on the spot if they were caught. Many workers were killed and wounded, mass arrests were made, and the General Council of the dissident socialist party was thrown in prison.

The predictions came true: the strike came to a painful and ineffectual end.

But the newspaper *Le Peuple* had pointed to the presence of agents provocateurs among the armed gangs that roamed the industrial regions, and the trial of the members of the General

Council proved that Le Peuple had it right. It was proved that a certain Laloin, who had chaired the congress at which the general strike was approved, was an agent provocateur. And it was also proved that one Pourbaix, who had set off dynamite bombs and issued revolvers to strikers, had had a secret night-time audience with the prime minister, Beernaert.

The upshot of the trial was the reconciliation of the two factions of the Workers' Party, which has always been indissolubly united ever since.

The Belgian socialists then laid the groundwork for a new general strike. Hundreds of comrades came forward as makeshift orators, writers, and organizers.

For four years, meetings were held in every region of the country—all of them calling for universal suffrage.

On August 10, 1890, Brussels witnessed a demonstration, which even the bourgeois press estimated was 80,000-strong; they marched through the streets of the city under torrential rainfall and a veritable hurricane without dispersing.

Once the huge crowd arrived at a suburban open space that had a commanding view of the entire city, before breaking up they made the following solemn pledge, of which everyone had a copy in writing: "Belgian workers swear that they shall not stop and shall not rest for a moment until they have won universal suffrage."

Scarcely had the party's orators read out the pledge than a formidable cry arose from the chests of all workers assembled in the vast clearing. "We swear it," they said, to endless applause, while the rain continued to fall in torrents.

It was an unforgettable sight.

From that day on, things happened quickly.

In November, the socialists organized another demonstration, the delegates from which were received at the town hall by Buls, the city burgomaster, and by Janson.

Buls and Janson, both of them deputies representing the capital, were approached by Volders on behalf of the Workers' Party, and promised to table a motion for review. They were true to their word and this time the motion was unanimously added to the agenda; but despite the lobbying by the left, the discussion of it was postponed until the 1891–1892 sitting.

It began indeed during the proceedings of February 2, 1892.

After lengthy, nitpicking debate, the Chamber passed a resolution in which it stated that Article 47 and several others from the Constitution relating to the reform of the Senate were in need of amendment.

The Houses were then duly dissolved. On June 14 elections were held. The socialists resolved to vote for the liberals so as to deny the Catholics a two-thirds majority in the Chamber.

The socialists' tactics had the desired outcome: the eighteen Catholic deputies from Brussels were replaced by eighteen liberals.

So the government no longer had its two-thirds majority.

The left's support was needed to get the electoral reform passed.

The Houses met on July 12, 1892, and appointed a 21-member commission to draw up, in agreement with the government, proposals to put before parliament. Proceedings were then adjourned until the November 8 session.

The proceedings that day were to be opened by the king. The socialists organized a large demonstration.

It was a Tuesday. Most of the workers from Brussels and surrounding areas went on strike. At around half past one that afternoon, a huge crowd gathered in the streets.

All the demonstrators wore leaflets on their caps that read: Long live universal suffrage.

Similar posters were affixed to the buildings lining the route of the procession.

At about two o'clock, out came the king with his staff: instantly, an immense chorus went up from the crowd: Long live universal suffrage—a cry that accompanied the king every step of the way.

When the king passed, Émile Vandervelde, who was standing among policemen, instead of presenting arms shouted out the fateful slogan and tossed a batch of leaflets between the legs of the king's horse. This was the signal for countless leaflets to start raining down on the king and the rest of the procession: the queen's carriage filled up with them. At one point, the king's horse, frightened, reared and looked as if it was about to throw its rider who, as white as a sheet, fled under the torrent of red leaflets and the deafening clamor of the crowd.

In parliament, Leopold II read a speech written by Beernaert, setting out the government's proposals: the king was acclaimed by all the deputies except for six radicals from Brussels who chanted Long live universal suffrage.

Outside, meanwhile, the crowds carried on demonstrating. At one point along the king's route stood the statue of the French general who had come to the Belgians' aid back in 1830; one worker clambered up it and placed a red flag in the general's hand. When the king saw, he turned his head and looked away as the crowd laughed uncontrollably.

So much for the first day.

In December, the government set out its proposals, according to which every citizen could vote who had reached the age of 25, had been living in the same municipality for a year, and owned property to the value of at least 2,000 francs or had been living for a year in a house of a certain value determined by the law, or had a higher education qualification, or could show by examination that he could read, write, and calculate.

The various parties, too, tabled a number of bills.

The Workers' Party, which had no representatives in Parliament, clung to its formula: universal suffrage, 21 years of age, and 6 months' residency. And at one of its congresses it had resolved on a general strike should the Constituent Assembly reject universal suffrage.

The government's bill was approved by the twenty-one-man Commission but none of the Liberals backed it, and that ensured that it would be rejected by the Chamber.

The debates resumed on February 28 and continued until April 18 without any votes being taken.

On March 29, a radical Brussels deputy, Féron, presented a new draft proclaiming universal suffrage but awarding two votes to men with a family.

On March 19, the Workers' Party's General Council issued a manifesto in which it urged workers to prepare themselves for the general strike.

On April 11 and 12, the Chamber rejected all of the drafts submitted to it, including the ones that included universal suffrage.

This was the signal for the strike that within two or three days had spread impressively to Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp, and the centers of industry.

Brussels was placed under a state of siege. Conscripts were recruited, and the civil guard was kept on stand-by for eight days.

In Ghent, strikers entered factories where work was still going on and slashed the machine-belts, forcing the entire workforce to stop. Four days in, in Ghent alone, there were 25,000 strikers. In Antwerp, the dock workers dumped goods into the sea and set the dockyard on fire.

In Brussels, armed gangs roamed the streets, smashing the windows of the major stores with stones and shooting it out with the police.

On April 13, the police arrested three members of the General Council who were leading a demonstration: Volders, Nais, and Vandervelde.

The news of their arrests added to the mayhem: even the labor unions that did not follow the Workers' Party decided to strike. The court, however, thought it prudent to release our three friends. That same day, as he left the Chamber, Woeste, a minister of state and leader of the Catholic party, was beaten up by a Brussels socialist, citizen Leveque, who was promptly arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

De Mot, Liberal deputy for Brussels at the time, who had voted against universal suffrage, was forced to retreat into a theater to escape mob violence.

On April 14, the gendarmes killed a woman in La Louvière, an important mining town with about 30,000 strikers.

In Verviers, there were another 30,000 strikers. The withdrawal of labor was complete: the deputies from that city did not dare come back home for fear of hostile demonstrations by the workers, who would wait for them every day at the station.

On the 16th, Buls, burgomaster of Brussels, while out walking the boulevards, received such a violent whack from a cane wielded by a person unknown that he collapsed, unconscious, and—in danger of death—was obliged to remain in bed for two months.

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Avanti has so far not published the rest of the account and we do not have the details of the events following those recounted above.¹⁶¹ But the essence, all in all, is this: that in the face of the unrest in the country, the Parliament feared revolution and looked quickly for a settlement, granting, not quite universal suffrage, but a great deal. Not feeling strong enough to insist on universal suffrage pure and simple, the socialists made do, for the moment, with such success as they had achieved and postponed the fight until later.

Now let us take a look at the implications of the whole story.

It was by means of insurrection that Belgium gained her independence and constitution back in 1830, and it was through the riots in '48 that she secured a reduction in the poll tax. Thereafter, for 36 years between '48 and '84, the fate of the country was entrusted to the good intentions of the Parliament and not another single step forward was made in respect of either political reform or social reform.

In 1884, the Workers' Party was formed, which is to say, the workers started to take care of their own interests. In '85 the idea of a general strike to press for universal suffrage was launched. In '86 violent strikes erupted, with accompanying armed gangs, machine-breaking, ransacking of plants, arson attacks on castles. "Order" was restored: the repression was terrible... but the very first "social legislation" dates from that year: inadequate and derisory though it may be, the bourgeoisie would never have passed it had they not been spurred to it by fear of further unrest.

In '87 there were further strikes, further violence, further revolts. Using agents provocateurs, the government tried to find a pretext for snuffing out the movement before it could become strong enough to win. But, as is often the case, government intrigues backfired because they served only to cement the union between the workers, which had only momentarily been shattered, and thereby it gave renewed impetus to the feared movement.

Since then, worker organization has gone from strength to strength and through demonstrations, rallies, strikes and revolts, the day came when the bourgeoisie had no option but to relent in order to avert revolution.

Let us now ask the parliamentary socialists: if the people, denied so-called political rights, were able, by virtue of the strength of their organization, to impose their wishes upon the government, why do you say that nothing can be achieved unless deputies are appointed? And why, having managed to win universal suffrage with admirable vigor, have they not managed to win anything worthwhile since then? Might it be because, whenever the people vote, they grow accustomed to looking to Parliament for everything and cease doing things for themselves?

Then again, all the effort put into securing the vote—for the right to appoint the people to whom they look for certain reforms—might that not have been effort better invested in going after the desired reforms directly?

But the parliamentary socialists could justifiably answer thus: what you would have us do—why haven't you done it yourself?

We shall explain that next time.

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