



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Belgian Workers Strike for Minimum Wage, Paid Vacations, 40 Hour Work Week and Union Rights 1936

**Time period notes:** *While the bulk of protests took place in May/June 1936, the campaign truly began in January 1935 with a series of incitatory speeches in Quaregnon.*

January

1935

to: June

1936

**Country:** Belgium

**Location City/State/Province:** *Brussels, Belgium*

**Location Description:** *The locations of the protests spread between Brussels, Antwerp and Liege.*

### Goals:

1. Raise the Minimum Wage from 27 francs per day to 30
2. Paid Vacation Days
3. Forty Hour Work Week
4. Trade Union Rights

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals

### Methods in 2nd segment:

### Methods in 3rd segment:

### Methods in 4th segment:

### Methods in 5th segment:

### Methods in 6th segment:

- 051. Walk-outs
- 117. General strike

### Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- Dockers
- as well as miners
- primarily Belgian workers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Emile Vandervelde, Belgian Labor Party, Socialist Trade Union

**Partners:**

Socialist Party, Catholic Party, Liberal Party

**Involvement of social elites:**

Achille Delattre, Paul Henri Spaak and Hendrik de Man

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Belgian Labor Party
- Brussels Federation of Labor
- Socialist Trade Union

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Catholic Party
- Liberal Party
- National Labor Conference
- Socialist Party

**Segment Length:** 3 months

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Paul Van Zeeland, George Theunis, Rex Party, Flemish Nationalists, Communist Party, and Private for Docking and Coal Mining and Private Bankers.

**Campaigner violence:**

On June 17th, 1936, during a strike conference in Liege, a small group of rioters tried to raid an arms factory, and another group set fire to a wooden bridge.

**Repressive Violence:**

Police used batons to disperse crowds at the strike conference in Liege, and threw tear gas into crowds on the May 22nd strike in Brussels.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

The campaign started with a 10,000 person protest. By the end of the campaign, 520,000 workers went on strike, and companies lost a total of 11,300,000 work days.

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In 1934, Hendrik De Man, leader of the Belgian Labor Party designed the Plan De Man for post-depression economic reform by preventing monopolies and ensuring fair wages. The economy at the time suffered because of post World War I depression and the devaluation (decrease in value) of the Franc, the French currency, which Belgium used at the time. In this same year, George Theunis, leader of the conservative government, cut unemployment benefits and pensions. On 19 January 1935, Hendrik De Man and local deputy, Achille Delattre delivered speeches to a group of miners in Quarengnon, inciting them to take nonviolent action against Theunis's oppressive regime. That same evening, De Man wrote an editorial for *Le Peuple*, a Belgian newspaper, called "Impressions from the Borinage: It is Five Minutes Till Midnight." Out of fear that his article would incite violent protest, De Man wrote another editorial, "The Hour of Plan Must Come Before the Hour of the General Strike," which called for a peaceful demonstration. Theunis outlawed a planned peaceful demonstration for February 24th. The Belgian Labor Party and the Socialist Trade Unions considered staging a general strike as a response to Theunis, but voted against it, deciding that such a reaction was too extreme.

Theunis's government ignored the Plan de Man and did not supervise Belgian banks. Bankers and entrepreneurs developed the reforms to the Belgian Franc in private meetings, and thus private businesses could control and manipulate the economy without government supervision. This caused an increase in unemployment and an economic crisis. When Theunis resigned, Paul Van Zeeland replaced him as Premier in May 1936. Van Zeeland's cabinet contained fewer representatives from the Catholic Party than years past and more representatives from the proto-fascist Rex Party, the Flemish Nationalists and the Communist Party, making one fourth of parliament anti-democratic. The Socialist Party, Catholic Party and Liberal Party aimed to reinstitute their positions of power and secure democracy in Belgium by allying against the other parties to lead the General Strikes.

The campaign had four demands: 1. Union Rights, 2. A New Minimum Wage, 3. Paid Vacation, 4. Forty Hour Work Week. The first protest of the campaign took place on 22 May 1936 when 15,000 coal miners congregated in Brussels to protest "famine wages" and were tear-gassed by the police. The following day, the same amount of protesters were joined by their wives, children and the press. The strikers held up signs saying "We want bread for our children, not tear bombs," and called the five Socialist members of Van Zeeland's cabinet traitors. That same day, fifteen miners quit a hunger strike at the suggestion of their colleagues.

The next strike took place in Antwerp on 4 June. A total of 10,000 dock workers went on strike to demand wage increases. Fifteen thousand bus and trolley workers joined the dock workers. Vessels were not able to dock at Antwerp. Van Zeeland sent in troops to corral the strikers. The troops arrested two strikers. The employers promised to revise wages in two weeks on the condition that the strike stop immediately, but the strike did not end until 21 June 1936, when Van Zeeland granted dock workers higher wages.

On 17 June, Achille Delattre, the new minister of labor, held a meeting with the private banks and companies. Following the meeting, Van Zeeland announced an agreement on the four demands: A new minimum wage, guarantees of trade union liberties, vacation time and a 40 hour work week. However, the government did not enforce the demands, but only directed employers to comply. The Brussels Federation of Trade Unions declared the change in policy insufficient and encouraged workers to continue striking. A strike conference met in Liege, but armed police broke up crowds under the law that no more than three people could congregate legally. A small group of strikers tried to raid an arms factory, and the police used their batons to disperse the crowds. Another small group set fire to a wooden bridge. The political parties sponsoring the strike did not endorse protestor violence because it reflected poorly on the campaign. The police arrested fifty people.

Strikers were not satisfied until Van Zeeland convened a National Labor Conference to monitor wages and workers' rights in privately owned companies and ensure that officials met the four demands. Work resumed on 22 June, after the Socialist Trade Union Committee ordered a resumption, declaring that the goals of the campaign had been met.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

1. The Belgian General Strikes of 1936 were influenced by similar campaigns in France (the Matignon Agreements) for workers' rights. The tactics used were inspired by earlier general strikes in Belgium throughout the late 19th century.
2. The tactics used in the Belgium General strikes were used in workers' campaigns in Belgium all through the rest of the 20th century.

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