

A CITY WITHIN THE CITY? MECHELEN AND THE ARSENAL – CENTRAL WORKSHOP OF THE STATE RAILWAYS, 1836-1914¹

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Anniversaries are excellent opportunities to look back on a rich past, and often they give rise to commemorative books or festschrifts. This also applies to the railways. A large tome appeared in 2001 whose chapters covered many subjects, sometimes not obvious ones.² This book can still be regarded as providing a proper sampling of current railway history in Belgium. Within this broader context of subjects covered, however, it appears that relatively little attention has been given to the railways in the 19th century in general and workshops and labour organisation in that period in particular.³ This is not surprising as nationally and internationally interest in the way in which the railways' workshops contribute to structuring urban social relationships is of relatively recent date. This is largely due to two factors, of which the easiest to explain of course concerns the source material. In addition to a lack of primary sources about the subject, the technical basis of the available sources is an additional impediment to many researchers. Where the 19th century is well documented with regard to the railways, this applies in particular to technical-administrative dossiers which do enable a reconstruction of the past but specifically from a technical angle. A search through the available sources is often more difficult when trying to write a social history of the railways. Various informal queries about archives of depots and workshops have provided no answers or have led one to assume that in the past little attention has been given to maintaining historical archives. A great deal of archive material has been lost because of the two world wars, both as a result of acts of war and for cautionary considerations.⁴ However, this does not mean that reconstructing the past is not possible. Secondary sources to some extent enable researchers to reconstruct the complex relationship between the city and the railways or the railway industry, and it is

¹ This text was translated from Dutch into English with the invaluable support of the SNCB/NMBS, the Belgian National Railway Company.

The provisional railway workshop would have been set up in the old arsenal of the former *Predikheren* monastery, which would explain the military reference in the name. Cf. Ch. BONNY, *Malines, centre des chemins de fer belges*, in *Handelingen van de Mechelse Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst*, (HKKOLKM), LII, 1948, p. 182-205. Other references confirming this have not been found. In any case, the name Arsenal is not commonly used for the French workshops.

² B. VAN DER HERTEN, M. VAN MEERTEN and G. VERBEURGT, (eds.), *Sporen in België. 175 jaar spoorwegen – 75 jaar NMBS*, Leuven, Universitaire Pers, 2001; also published as ID., *Le temps du train. 175 ans de chemins de fer en Belgique. 75^e anniversaire de la SNCB*, Louvain, 2001.

³ M.C.G. ROGIER, *Bijdrage tot de Geschiedenis van de Belgische Spoorwegen te Mechelen*, Mechelen, 1979, 2nd print, 153 p. is a welcome exception to this. Together with his retired colleagues of *De Mijlpaal*, he scanned the local press and gathered all the information. Part of it has been used or quoted in this publication. The entire collection of articles and sources is available at De Mijlpaal and at the Belgian Railways (B-Holding – Archive and Picture library).

⁴ Cf. above P. VAN HEESVELDE, *Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg. De spoorwegexploitatie tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, in VAN DER HERTEN et al., *Sporen*, p. 183-199 and ID., *Au service de deux maîtres. La reprise du travail à la SNCB en 1940*, in *Une entreprise publique dans la guerre: la SNCF, 1939-1945* (Actes du VIII^e Colloque de l'Association pour l'histoire des chemins de fer en France, Paris, Assemblée Nationale, 21-22 juin 2000), Paris, 2001, p. 105-121.

possible to explore in what way these relationships structured or just failed to structure one another. On the basis of population censuses, population registers, the press and even literature, it is possible to gain a clearer picture of the 19th century railways. In addition to such source material, literature and poetry can help to throw light on the past or at least refine research through the available sources.⁵

As a result of epistemological traditions within social history, both labour history and urban history, this specific location within the urban fabric emerged relatively late as a subject of research. Labour historians have widely studied institutions and the development of social relations while urban historians have for a long time focused on urbanisation and suburbanisation. The relationship between a city and the railways can be viewed from various angles. In this contribution, I will confine myself to considering the growth of the workshop and a number of salient consequences for employment, urbanisation and the impact of these processes on the urban social fabric. The effect of line infrastructure on space and the way in which space is structured by station surroundings have been the subject of several studies. The question is what the consequences of a rapidly growing transport system are for a relatively small city. To what extent is the Central Workshop a “place” or a separate “territory” within the city where labour relations are structured differently from those in the urban fabric? It should be noted from the outset that the labour-capital opposition seems less appropriate in this context because the establishment of the Central Workshop was a government initiative where workers did demand particular rights but where, on the other hand, the authorities probably wished to contribute to a particular form of civic awareness and used the labour force to which it provided work as a stabilising factor in an environment that was subject to considerable political change.

A city within a city?

At the beginning of the 19th century, Mechelen apparently played no appreciable role in economic terms. In the 18th century, the city served as a relatively important transit centre; according to Verbeemen 3.2% of the labour potential worked in the transport sector in this period, a percentage that dropped rapidly in the first quarter of the 19th century. There was a decline in particular in inland shipping, especially after the advent of the railways.⁶ Article 1 of the Railway Act of 1 May 1834 brought about a very rapid change in Mechelen’s relatively weak economic position. In the 19th century there was a gradual shift of the working population towards the metal, wood and construction sectors. In Mechelen, the furniture industry and chair manufacture gained ground compared with the textile sector which lost some of its importance. A remarkable aspect

⁵ P. VAN HEESVELDE, *The Rolling Life. Gustaaf Vermeersch and the Belgian State Railways*, in *3rd International Conference for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility*, York, 2005 (digital publication). The fiction literature in the Dutch speaking region has been extensively anthologized by W. HANSEN, *Bestijg nooit de trein zonder uw valies met dromen. Gedichten, verhalen, Columms vanaf 1829* [Never get on the train without your suitcase full of dreams. Poems, stories, columns as from 1829], Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 1989, 476 p., and additions by F. SPEET, *Op het spoor*, Amsterdam, Antwerpen, Contact, 2003, 207 p. Strangely enough the most important railway novel in Dutch by Gustaaf Vermeersch is unmentioned.

⁶ J. VERBEEMEN, *De demografische evolutie van Mechelen*, in *HKKOLKM*, LVII, 1953, p. 63-97.

was the large number of home workers in the wood and construction sector compared with the significant workforce concentrations in the Central Workshop of the state railways and the companies supplying the Workshop and the railways.

Under the 1834 Act, Mechelen became the hub of the state railways: *‘There shall be established in the Kingdom a system of railways with Mechelen as its central point, extending eastwards towards the Prussian frontier via Leuven, Liège and Verviers, northward via Antwerp, westward to Ostend via Dendermonde, Ghent and Bruges and southward to Brussels and to the French border through, Hainaut.’*⁷ Not only is Mechelen designated as the junction of the two main lines to be built but it is also mentioned as the central hub of the railway network where, therefore, the central administration would be established and where the largest workshop would be built. The decision was ratified by royal decree in 1838.⁸ The reason for choosing Mechelen is not really clear. Of course, when the first link was established the authorities chose a railway section of appropriate length and with a minimum of additional infrastructure, but this does not explain why Mechelen was chosen as its centre. There were probably no large reserves of labourers there but presumably the wages were sufficiently low in the area. The lack of a central position – Mechelen is in fact some distance away from the centre of the country – has been a contributing factor to the central hub of the Belgian railway network being moved to Brussels, even though the various services have remained in Mechelen, with the exception of the central administration.⁹ It is obvious that this shift did not occur without protests on the part of the city authorities.

The consequences of the growing railway system for Mechelen are reflected in the success that this new mode of transport attained. Just one month after the first train journeys from Brussels, it was noted in the *Moniteur Belge*, the Official Newspaper publishing Belgian legislation, that Mechelen had become a *“faubourg”* [suburb] of Brussels. Every day, large numbers of spectators turned up to watch the trains at Allée Verte/Groendreef, where the first railway station of Brussels had been built, and the daily number of travellers was undoubtedly also considerable. On standard train sets, 624 passengers could travel per section; on a daily basis, this was tantamount to 3744 journeys up to June 1835 on the three links in each direction. From June 1835, the number of connections in each direction increased to five, further increasing the number of passengers on the Brussels-Mechelen section to 6240 journeys a day. Repeated comments that there was insufficient capacity on the trains as a result of which travellers could not depart suggest in any case that every train was filled to capacity.¹⁰ The first complaints about the railway system confirm the descriptions of its success. People were dying for a chance to travel by train and complained in the press that there

⁷ Belgian Law Gazette - *Moniteur Belge* (MB), 4 May 1834. Cf. about the making of the law B. VAN DER HERTEN, *Nieuwe interpretaties over de besluitvorming rond de eerste spoorlijn in België* [New interpretations about the decision making concerning the first railway line in Belgium], 1830-1834, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* (BTFG), 1995, 73 (2), p. 379-400.

⁸ Pasinomie, 1838, p. 514.

⁹ M. LAFFUT, *Vers le réseau ferré le plus dense du globe*, in VAN DER HERTEN, *Sporen in België*, p. 70-71.

¹⁰ *Monteur Belge* (furtheron: MB), 27 May 1835. The calculations in this source differ from my calculations; an interchange of the digits in the figure in the original source is at the origin of this mistake.

were too few connections a day, which was not technically possible in the first month. “*Even though since 1 June two additional trains have departed each day from Brussels and Mechelen, the flow of passengers has not shown any sign of diminishing, far from it! Unless one has obtained tickets the day before, it is quite impossible to find a place on the train at the times fixed for departure*”. Potential travellers ask that it should be made possible to book 48 hours in advance, but places are apparently bought up for speculative purposes. There are no guarantees for the return journey. The high demand for transport meant that Mechelen soon needed infrastructure to accommodate passengers: “*Since the railways had been inaugurated, it was regretted that no establishment had been erected close to the travellers, and that it was necessary to cross the whole city of Mechelen to find a hotel or restaurant.*”¹¹ It seems to have been a general phenomenon that railway stations were situated at the periphery and not within the city. The reasons for this were not only of a military nature. With regard to Mechelen, it was even noted in foreign travel guides that the city council had been eager to keep the train outside the city centre and the author of one particular guide added subtly in parentheses: “*(gaudet Mechlinia stultis), like the wise men of Northampton, Oxford and Maidenstone, stoutly resisted this, and with success. Now few of the millions who pass this city annually enter it, and still fewer stop here*”. In any case, the effect was to lengthen travel time as it was often necessary to take a stage coach from the stations which was in no way a guarantee for a comfortable journey.¹² The opening of “*the public garden with restaurant*” on the Coloma estate was a first step towards the expansion of a new passenger infrastructure. But the high demand for transport not only boosted the development of the station surroundings, the need to service rolling stock also required appropriate infrastructure. The first pictures of the first station of Mechelen – the old station was to be completely rebuilt twice – suggest that work was started very early on to build maintenance infrastructure (locomotive shed, wagon repair, workshops, etc.).

Before long, the question of Mechelen’s place in the hierarchy in the new transport system was addressed. The choice of a radial network meant that Brussels would be at the core of the network. Given the advantages of a central position, it is not surprising that the city council expressed disappointment in 1846 in response to reports about direct rail links between Leuven and Brussels and Brussels and Ghent, and wrote to the King as follows: “*If there is a shift in the central position, Mechelen will lose everything it has done in this regard. Moreover, who can tell whether in this case we will even keep the Arsenal which will follow the displacement? Instead of a population of workers, we may well have a population of paupers to feed! Moreover, the number of dwellings has increased as a result of the establishment of the railways and the birth of new industries. Moving the railways elsewhere will irrevocably lead to a drop in land value.*”¹³ Two years later, the central position of Mechelen was defended by invoking the text of the law: “*May it suffice to note that the Act of 1 May 1834 made Mechelen into the centre of the national railways and that we have a right to count on this title*

¹¹ MB, 14 May 1835; 26 May 1835; 29/30 May 1835; 07 June 1835.

¹² *Handbook for travellers on the continent*, London, John Murray, 1854, p. 94 en 153.

¹³ Mechelen City Archives (SAM), Modern Archives, Book 765, 27 June 1846.

and the position it should give us being maintained”.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it had already been clearly pointed out in the press that the railway junction ought not to be located in a “small town” but in the capital.¹⁵ In contrast, Murray’s Handbook for Travellers, quoted above, still refers to Mechelen’s central position as a railway junction in its 1854 edition: “*Mechlin Stat. where the trains stop for a few min. is the point of departure from which 4 lines of railway ramify through Belgium... There is almost invariably great confusion, and frequently delay here, from the meeting of the trains. Travellers should take care they are not put in the wrong train, and that they are not run over in crossing the numerous lines of rails. Sheds, at least ought to be constructed to protect passengers and their baggage from the rain.*”¹⁶

The centrality of Mechelen on the railway network made it necessary not only to build a large workshop; other industries were also attracted to the railway hub.¹⁷ The work on expanding the station and the workshops that started in 1836 was quite impressive. In the press, the work was compared with the building of a new town. Four years later, there were 33 new buildings – some not yet completed – on the sites reserved for the state railways. According to Verbeemen, there were 200 workers at the start of construction in 1836; we know for sure that in 1846 there were 666 workers directly or indirectly involved in work at the Arsenal. This was connected with the growth of the network, the rise in the supply of transport services and the growth in rolling stock (see Table 1). In Verbeemen’s study quoted above, the author notes that in 1829 the workforce required was not available in Mechelen. According to Verbeemen, about 60% of the work force had come from outside Mechelen. He states that large numbers of workers had migrated to Mechelen from the Liège basin.¹⁸ The workforce of the Belgian railways also included several foreigners but it is not known how many worked at the Workshop. According to the Belgian Official Gazette, the Belgian personnel very rapidly acquired the necessary know-how and became independent from foreign expertise. Their know-how was even exported after some time. “*Les élèves ont bientôt égalé les maîtres*” [The pupils were soon equal to the masters]. Foreign scientists and industrialists visited the workshops. It was not without pride that the Official Gazette noted in 1842 that “*les ingénieurs du Chemin de fer, MM Poncelet et Ficher sont de retour de Paris, ou ils ont eu plusieurs entrevues avec MM les ingénieurs français, qui tenaient à s’éclairer les règlements d’administration adoptés en Belgique pour le service de locomotion sur nos chemins de fer, l’ordre et la discipline, l’exactitude et la régularité qui règnent dans ce service.*” [The railway engineers, Messrs Poncelet and Ficher have returned from Paris where they have had several discussions with the French engineers who wished to be informed of the administrative regulations adopted

¹⁴ ID., *Rapport annuel*, 1847-1848, p. 89.

¹⁵ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Den Onpartijdigen*, 29 October 1843.

¹⁶ *Handbook*, 1854, p. 153.

¹⁷ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Journal d’Anvers*, 22 March 1837, with regard to the purchase of land for the development of the workshop. “*Cet exemple sera bientôt suivi par d’autres spéculateurs et industriels*” [This example will soon be followed by other speculators and industrials]. Also MB, 2 September 1837.

¹⁸ VERBEEMEN, *Demografische ontwikkeling*; cf. for the development of the station district; H. DE NIJN, *De stationswijk*, in H. INSTALLÉ, et al., *Historische stedenatlas van België, Mechelen II*, Mechelen, 1997, p. 260-264.

in Belgium for train services on our railways, the order and discipline, the punctuality and regularity which reigns on this service].¹⁹ The acquisition of this knowledge was necessary because the rolling stock and traction equipment was increasing rapidly. Table 1 provides an overview of the growth in the number of locomotives between 1835 and 1848. The second column indicates the number of locomotives per year, the third column shows the accumulative frequency of these numbers in the period from 1835 to 1848, which was the era when locomotives were still often given a name when put into service.

[Number of locomotives 1835-1848]
 [year / number / Σ]

Aantal locomotieven 1835 - 1848		
jaar	aantal	Σ
1835	6	6
1836	6	12
1837	11	23
1838	31	54
1839	33	87
1840	35	122
1841	4	126
1842	3	129
1843	14	143
1844	4	147
1845	2	149
1846	5	154
1847	0	154
1848	8	162

Table 1

Source: Parliamentary Documents, 1848, 330, pp. 26-35 and author's own calculations
 The question of the regional origin of the railway personnel is of course not limited to the engineers and managers. In the early years of the railways, the lion's share of the Mechelen industry, in particular with regard to low-skilled workers, was probably supplied by the surrounding countryside. Table 2 shows the population figures for Mechelen, the district and the province.

Table 2: Mechelen population, 1815-1910

Year	City Mechelen		District		Province		Country	
	Total	Index	Total	Index	Total	Index	Total	Index
1815	20412							
1846	27663	100	116.223	100	406.354	100	4.337.196	100
1856	31371	113	119.718	103	434.485	107	4.529.560	104
1866	34205	123	125.352	108	465.607	115	4.827.833	111
1876	39029	141	136.240	117	538.381	132	5.336.185	123
1880	42526	153	143.051	123	577.232	142	5.520.009	127
1890	51014	184	162.302	140	699.919	172	6.069.321	140
1900	55705	201	179.903	155	819.159	211	6.693.548	154

¹⁹ MB, 14 December 1840 and 19 October 1842.

1910	59141	213	204.413	176	968.677	238	7.423.784	171
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Source: K. Houthuys, *Een bijdrage tot de vroegste geschiedenis van de Socialistische arbeidersbeweging te Mechelen (1871-1896)*[A contribution to the earliest history of the socialist workers movement in Mechelen (1871-1896)], Free University of Brussels, Unpublished Master's thesis, 1978

The slowed growth of the district and the province could be indicative of this. In other words, the growth of the urban industries probably occurred partially at the expense of the surrounding countryside. The question is, of course, whether the Arsenal exerted the same attraction on the population in the countryside as the urban industry as a whole. There has still not been any systematic research into the geographic origin of the railway personnel, even though this could be done on the basis of the various censuses. A limited sample survey from the 1866 census shows that for the streets investigated about half of the railway personnel recorded Mechelen as their place of birth, about 20% had migrated from far away and about 30% had come from the immediate surroundings or medium distance. In other words, the countryside around Mechelen did serve as a reservoir of labour for the Arsenal. It was decided to extract the sample from the 1866 census. This provides a clearer picture of the worker population which still lived dispersed throughout the city. The Hanswijk De Bercht railway quarter opposite the Arsenal was of a later date. No doubt, migration from the countryside to the city diminished when the regional tramlines around the city were opened. In 1890 the socialist newspaper *De Werker* reported that about 3 000 workers were employed at the Central Workshop in Mechelen, of whom 60% resided in the city. The remaining 40% was not included in the census.²⁰ The growth of the workshop is reflected not only in the increase in employment but also the spatial expansion and land occupancy behind the station. This development can be substantiated quite easily on the basis of old designs and plans drawn over the years. We are less well informed about the level of employment due to a lack of studies on the censuses. However, we do find relevant figures in various other sources. Table 3 shows these estimates which do show a particular development in quantities. Interpretation of the table is not straightforward because the time interval between the data obtained from the various sources differs considerably. Over periods of about 20 years, employment at the Central Workshop approximately tripled. There is no doubt that this growth had strongly catalytic effects on overall employment in the city.

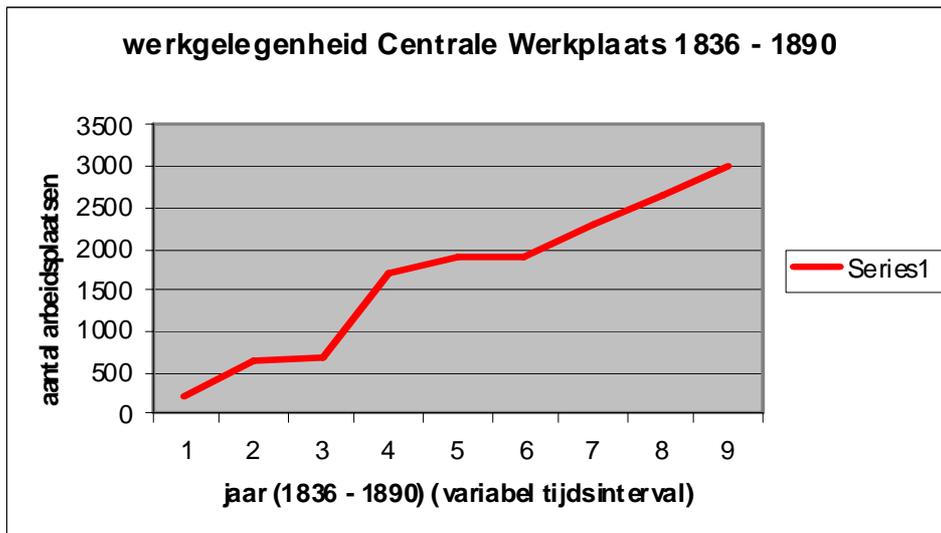
Table 3: Estimates of employment at the Central Workshop, 1836 - 1890

Year	Number of workers
1836	200
1846	666

²⁰ *De Werker*, 17 August 1890, no. 15, p. 3, quoted in K. HOUTHUYS, *Een bijdrage tot de vroegste geschiedenis van de Socialistische arbeidersbeweging te Mechelen. (1871-1896)*, [A contribution to the earliest history of the Socialist workers movement in Mechelen (1871-1896)], unpublished Master's thesis, VuBrussel, 1977-78, History section. The relations, as described in *De Werker*, are confirmed on the basis of other data; during the workers' count of 1896, ca. 3000 workers are counted, of whom 1802 are living in Mechelen. Cf. P. COECKELBERGH, *De arbeidersstand te Mechelen, 830-1887. Een sociale en economische studie*, unpublished Master's thesis, UGent, 1967.

1855	700
1870	1700
1871	1900
1872	1900
1873	2288
1885	2663
1890	3000

Sources: Houthuys, Coeckelbergh, Verbeemen, De Mijlpaal documentation



[Employment Central Workshop, 1836-1890. Number of workers, Year (1836-1890), variable time interval]

During the last quarter of the 19th century, Mechelen became a major industrial centre. The industrial censuses of 1896, which included only companies employing more than 100 workers, clearly show the sectorial division of Mechelen's industry, with wood and furniture accounting for 32.3% of the city's workforce. The Arsenal (18.23 %), the metal sector (9.86%) and the transport sector (2.61%) made up the other pole of activities.²¹ Together with the Arsenal, companies such as Cabany and Ragheno played an important role. The workshop went through a very significant period of growth between 1860 and 1875, after which development stagnated until it recovered in the 1890s with the construction of a new covered workshop. The stagnation in the mid 1870s is worthy of note because in that period there was probably a considerable increase in maintenance work on rolling stock as a result of the systematic repurchase of lines given in concession. A number of supply companies, the best known being Ragheno and Cabany, developed at an almost equal pace with the Arsenal. For the later Usines Ragheno, the report on the commodo-incommodo inquiry for the construction of the forge was drawn up in November 1850. Set up as a forge for bearing and suspension springs, the company developed rapidly into a construction plant for rolling stock.²²

²¹ HOUTHUYS, *Bijdrage*, p. 13.

²² ROGIERS, *Geschiedenis*, p. 66; De Mijlpaal, 16 November 1850.

With regard to Cabany, it is less clear when it was set up; Coeckelberghs claims it was in 1864 whereas Houthuys suggests 1872. The arguments she adduces for the latter claim are derived from the report drawn up by the official responsible for the urban planning report, the decision about this taken by the city authorities, a plan concerning the surrounding area and the announcement in 1871 in the city's report on the establishment of a major construction plant.²³ Moreover, Cabany was mentioned in the Directory of the city of Ghent from 1866 to 1873 under the heading iron turners and iron founders.²⁴ In 1892 Cabany found itself in difficulty. First it tried to find a solution through a capital increase. This was followed by dismissals and shorter working hours. In 1895 the company closed down.²⁵ This closure coincided with the announcement of the construction of a workshop in Wallonia (Namur), as a result of which 100 jobs would be lost in Mechelen. Local politicians seized the debate on the budget as an opportunity to express their displeasure about this and make it clear to the competent minister that the workshop in Mechelen was under-utilised. “*Nous avons à l'atelier de Malines des ouvriers très au courant, des ajusteurs wallons en très grand nombre et des menuisiers flamands, car c'est une particularité remarquable: les bons ajusteurs sont surtout wallons et les bons menuisiers sont flamands. Nous sommes donc admirablement outillés et nous avons d'excellents ouvriers. Pourquoi ne pas utiliser davantage l'atelier central de Malines pour arriver ainsi à réaliser de grandes économies?*” [At the Mechelen workshop, we have highly skilled workers, large numbers of Walloon fitters and Flemish carpenters, for it is a remarkable peculiarity: good fitters are mostly Walloons and good carpenters are Flemish. We are therefore admirably equipped and have an excellent workforce. Why not make more use of the central workshop of Mechelen so as to secure major savings?] ”²⁶ A few years earlier, in 1881, the city authorities had already reacted to the construction of workshops near Mons and Ghent. However, it is clear from the 1887 report that the new workshops did not cause a major outflow of workers from the existing workshops.²⁷ From 1896, the sector recovered and the number of companies, both large and small, involved in the manufacture of rolling stock or the supply of railway equipment increased. As regards coach and carriage builders, it may be assumed that the companies mentioned here were mainly supplying customers outside the railway sector.

The economic recovery of the railway equipment manufacturing sector did not occur until 1896-97. From that year, the number of companies - small and large ones - involved in building equipment and supplying spare parts continued to grow. In the *Rapport sur l'administration et la situation des affaires de la commune de Malines*

²³ COECKELBERGHS, *Arbeidersstand*, p. 127; HOUTHUYS, *Bijdrage*, p. 15 en SAM, *Modern Archief*, 1872, vak 54-36.

²⁴ Archives of the city of Ghent, *Wegwijzer der stad Gent*; apparently the company relocates several times. from 1866 to 1868 it is based at the Begijnvest 28 in Ghent, from 1869 to 1871 in the Prinsenhof-Zakstraat 11 and 1872-1873 in the Prinsenstraat 11.

²⁵ Cf. above *Vooruit*, 25 March 1892; 4 February 1893 and 4 March 1895. Also in *De Werker*, 5 March 1895.

²⁶ Belgian Parliament, Chamber, *Actes/ Handelingen*, 1894, 9 May, p. 1374; cf also: *Vooruit*, 12 February 1895 and *Mechelsche Courant*, 17 February 1895.

²⁷ Documentation De Mijlpaal, , *Mechelse Courant*, 16 October 1881 and SAM, *Rapport sur l'administration et la situation des affaires de la commune de Malines, 1886-1887*, passim.

[Report on the administration and business of the city of Mechelen], mention is made of three companies manufacturing railway equipment in 1896, and by 1910 there were 19. The growth in boiler making and coach and carriage building is much less substantial. See also Table 4.

Table 4: Evolution of supply companies of the railway sector 1894 - 1912.

Year	Railway equipment	Boilershops	Wagon manufacturers	Carriage manufacturers
1894-95	2	19	4	4
1895-96	1	19	4	4
1896-97	3	19	4	4
1897-98	4	20	4	4
1898-99	4	20	4	5
1899-1900	4	20	6	5
1900-01	6	20	6	6
1901-02	10	20	6	7
1902-03	10	20	6	7
1903-04	12	20	6	7
1904-05	14	22	6	7
1905-06	16	25	6	8
1910-11	19	26	6	8
1911-12	19	25	5	7

Source: SAM, Report on the administration, per year.

A city and its workers

The large concentration of workers was a new phenomenon in the urban fabric which modified the conditions on the labour market. For instance, the Employment Conditions Regulation of 1838²⁸ was relatively new for the city. It included special measures for workers at the workshops. The Regulation comprises 372 articles, only a limited number of which directly concern the working environment. The main emphasis is on the terms of recruitment. Article 150 concerns the so called *Livret de Travail* – a work permit; only workers holding an individual employment record could be engaged. As usual, they had to hand in their employment record to the workshop supervisor. If they did not hold a personal employment record, a formal certificate of good conduct issued by the mayor could also serve for temporary employment but the worker was obliged to obtain an employment record. However, the state railways gave their own interpretation to the provisions of the employment record. Because of the scale of the network, they could quickly inform all stations when workers were dismissed. In each station, a list was kept of all those who had been fired, including the reason for dismissal. Article 151 made provision for working hours and rest periods. Workers worked for 10 hours a day in shifts of 2 ½ hours interspersed by 30 minutes' rest, except for the lunch break which lasted 1 hour. A full working day was therefore 12 hours, including the break. There is evidence that workers often worked for longer than the work schedule. Arriving 10 minutes late at work meant losing a quarter of one's daily wage. There was a separate set of rules for absence because of illness and absence without leave. Wages were calculated on a daily basis, with minimum and maximum levels for each category of

²⁸ MB, 12 September 1838, 1er supplément.

personnel. Wages were paid every fortnight. An accident meant that a mistake had been made and each mistake meant that someone was liable. The article dealing with this aspect was in accordance with the legislation in force at the time under which the worker was held liable for the damage suffered, both his own damage and that caused to the company or third parties. Some aspects of these provisions were strange for a city where home working and small workshops were the rule and large enterprises the exception.

In 1841, the workshop regulation of the Arsenal was published in the Parliamentary Documents.²⁹ It was a more detailed elaboration of the provisions laid down in Employment Conditions Regulation of 1838. Of the 72 articles regarding the Arsenal, 42 concerned discipline, spread over 3 chapters: 20 articles concerning the *police des ateliers* (workshop regulation), 15 concerning working hours and 7 concerning penalties and fines which the workers could incur. The workshop regulation mainly dealt with quality control and workshop supervision: “*les contre-maîtres surveillent continuellement les hommes sous leurs ordres, tant pour la manière dont ils exécutent le travail que pour le temps qu’ils y mettent*” [the foremen constantly supervise the men under their command, both to check how they carry out their work and how long it takes them to do it]. Young workers were more closely supervised, in particular to teach them the right way to work: “*au besoin, ils (les contremaitres) se mettent eux mêmes à l’ouvrage et montrent aux ouvriers maladroits ou peu exercés, comment ils doivent travailler* [if necessary they (the foremen) start doing the work themselves, in order to show the less handy or less experienced workers how to proceed].”³⁰ The regulations also highlighted workers’ clear and extensive responsibilities, e.g. with regard to the tools they used which were no longer their own property. At the same time, care was therefore taken to ensure that the workers were fully aware of working processes, discipline, etc.

In contrast with the 1838 Regulation, which provided for 10-hour working days, Article 33 derogated from this rule: “*Les heures auxquelles doivent commencer et finir les travaux sont fixées par un ordre de service du directeur sur la proposition des chefs de service et de l’inspecteur de l’Arsenal*” [The times for starting and finishing work are laid down in a work instruction from the director, on the proposal of the department heads and the inspector of the Arsenal]. This shows that provision was no longer made for a fixed working schedule as the length of the working day would vary in accordance with the amount of work. Turning up late for work was also made subject to more stringent rules. No specific penalties or fines were provided for; instead, the gate was closed and the workers lost part of their wage due to absence.

There was not only discipline. Quite soon after the setting-up of the Arsenal, a relief and pension fund was set up for the railway personnel. In general, the pension fund for railway workers was regarded as an essential advantage for the personnel. However, this view requires some explanation. The concept of a pension is usually associated with a

²⁹ Belgian Parliament, Chamber, *Documents of Parliament*, 1841-1842, 365, 2 June 1842, *Compte rendu des opérations effectuées jusqu’au 31 décembre 1841*, p. 29-35.

³⁰ ID.

sum which manual and clerical workers receive from the time when they reach pensionable age. A press report of 1874 makes it clear that there was no such thing as a retirement pension. In that year, Minister Beernaert decorated foreman Dehertoghe for 40 years' loyal service. Dehertoghe was 74 years old at the time and still working at the workshop.³¹ The decree of 1 September 1838 "*qui institue une caisse de pensions et une caisse de secours pour le personnel des chemins de fer et du département des travaux publics*" [which establishes a pension fund and a relief fund for the personnel of the railways and of the public works department] made a clear distinction between the two funds. The pension fund only served "*les veuves et orphelins des fonctionnaires et employés du chemin de fer, ayant une nomination royale ou ministérielle*" [the widows and orphans of the railway civil servants and employees who have a royal or ministerial nomination]. On the other hand, the relief fund is "*établie en faveur des ouvriers employés par l'administration dans différents services du chemin de fer*" [established in favour of the workers employed by the administration in various railway departments]. In other words, there was from the outset an essential distinction between civil servants with pension rights for widows or orphans, and manual workers who would receive compensation from the fund in the event of incapacity for work or death resulting from an accident at work. The funds were financed through deduction of a particular percentage from wages, deduction from wage increases during the first month following promotion, and revenue from penalties and fines.³²

Measures were also taken in other fields to ensure hygienic and healthy working conditions, and quite soon "social welfare" was introduced. This was because preventing accidents was cheaper for authorities who made provision for their own pension funds and solidarity funds. There are many examples of this: provision of specific safety measures on machines to prevent accidents at work; a free health care scheme from 1850 under which physicians and pharmacists provided services to railwaymen, bathing facilities at the workshop, even though eventually workers could use the facilities only twice a year³³; setting-up of a cooperative shop for railway personnel, the company's own housing corporations, in particular after the First World War; initiatives were taken in the private sphere such as contributions to leisure activities, or at least what we would nowadays regard as leisure, such as the Union Fraternelle, the Arsenal's own brass band, and its own workmen's clubs. The brass band and the 'Genootschap voor Zang', a choral society probably set up in 1850, had been established with a clear objective in mind: "*deze inrigting had noodzakelijk ten doel de verbroedering onder de werklieden te onderhouden, en hunne ledige uren op een nuttige en aangename wijze doen door te brengen*"³⁴ [the purpose of this organisation was necessarily to stimulate the fraternization among the workers and to make them spend their idle hours in a pleasant and useful manner]. The state railways went quite far in bonding their personnel. As early as 1843, it was examined how "guards" could be housed at level crossings through the railway company's intervention. "*Den prijs voor*

³¹ Documentation Mijlpaal, *Mechels Nieuws- en Aenkondigingsblad*, 23 August 1874.

³² Pasinomie, 1838, 1305, p. 556-560.

³³ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Mechelse Courant*, 22 August 1886; Report from the Works Commission Mechelen.

³⁴ ID., *Memoriën raekende Mechelen*, 12 February 1851.

den grond en het huys wordt met kleyne gedeelten van de jaerwedde der wachters afgehouden, welke aldus ongevoelig eygenaers van eene kleyne wooning worden [en] op dese wijze letterlijck aen den ijzeren weg verbonden zijn” [The price of the premises is deducted in small instalments from the guards' annual salary, who thus become, without feeling it, the owners of a small house and who are thus literally linked to the railways]. The houses had a market garden, enabling the occupants to grow their own vegetables.³⁵ Nevertheless, there is no evidence that this strategy was actually implemented as early as 1843.

Many of the facilities provided for railway personnel were introduced much later for workers in other sectors. This may indicate that the railways found it difficult to recruit staff if all they had to offer was a strict working discipline. Moreover, the benefits and advantages bonded the workers to the company. It has recently been found that increasing numbers of large enterprises provided “special services” for their staff (ironing workshop, day nursery, shopping services, etc.). But some nuance is in order here too. On 15 August 1886, Pieter Hertsens, painter at the Arsenal, bore witness before the Work Committee. Essentially he deals with the Arsenal’s wage policy and the state railways’ staff policy. The low wages paid to workers obliges them to do odd jobs after hours, putting them in competition with workers outside the railway workshop. Moreover, the supply of workers from the countryside exerted strong wage pressures on workers residing in the city; *“Zij hebben zoveel onkosten niet als de stadswerklieden en arbeiden dan ook voor een eene daghuur waar de stadswerkman niet kan op leven*” [They do not have as many expenses as the city workers and therefore work for a salary that is insufficient for the city worker to live off]. For the Committee’s information, Pieter Hertsens calculated that per family member he was earning 39 centimes a day. At the same time, he drew attention to the language problem: many foremen, team supervisors and engineers spoke only French.³⁶

The public authorities’ endeavours for the benefit of the personnel undoubtedly contributed to creating and strengthening the team spirit and specific work culture. It is difficult to say to what extent the various measures contributed to reducing the combativeness of railway personnel in the 19th labour struggle because only one single workshop has been studied. Moreover, any conclusion about this depends on the general political choices and subsequent changes throughout the 19th century. With regard to Mechelen, it is correct to note that towards the end of the 19th century the men working at the Arsenal were not fighting on the side of the workers of the supply companies, either with regard to readiness to take action or showing solidarity. No mention is made of any railway personnel taking part in the strikes in Mechelen companies between 1885 and 1900. This does not mean that railway workers were not active in this field. Various actions have been recorded, e.g. against the workshop’s management, participation in food riots or protests against high food prices, specific actions of protest against changed working conditions, etc., but also collective action in support of parliamentarians who had come out in support of the workers at the Arsenal.

³⁵ ID., *Den Onpartijdigen*, 29 October 1843.

³⁶ ID., *Mechelse Courant*, 15 August 1886; Report from the Works Commission Mechelen.

In 1851, there was considerable commotion among the railway personnel because of wage reductions, adjustment of working hours and in particular penalties imposed for turning up late for work. Up to that time, latecomers had forfeited a quarter of the wage payable on the day they were late. The management intended to increase this to half a day's wage. In those days about 700 Arsenal employees protested against these severe and pitiless measures, demanding "*hunne voorrechten*" [their privileges] back. On the basis of the information from Table 3, readiness to take action would have been almost 100%. It is also fascinating to see that there were no demonstrations in the city.³⁷ Two days later, a strike broke out when the workers downed tools. The strike was broken by the military, with soldiers surrounding the station and the workshop. 343 soldiers stayed in Mechelen for three months, "*ter gelegenheid van den opstand van het werkvolk*" [on the occasion of the revolt of the workers].³⁸

During the food riots in 1854, the protesters also included men from the Arsenal; "*Après la cessation des travaux dans les ateliers du chemin de fer, les groupes se sont reformés, plus hostiles que la veille*" [After the workers downed tools in the railway workshops, the groups reformed, seeming more hostile than previously]. The next day, the protests went on but: "*on y remarquait, toute fois moins d'ouvriers des ateliers des chemins de fer de l'état, des ordres sévères étant donnés dans les ateliers contre toute participation aux manifestations*" [with clearly less workers from the state railway workshops present, as strict orders had been issued in the workshops against any participation in the demonstrations] . The next day, the action taken was even more drastic: "*les ouvriers, tant des ateliers des chemins de fer de l'état que de plusieurs fabriques particulières ont reçu défense, ce matin à l'heure de déjeuner de sortir des ateliers; cette sage mesure à contribué efficacement au maintien de l'ordre*".³⁹ [this morning, the workers, both from the state railway workshops and various factories, received the order not to leave the workshops; this wise measure has contributed efficiently to keeping the order]. It is worth noting the difference with the action described above: now there were protests inside the city, after working hours. On the earlier occasion, the workers demonstrated within the confines of the company, during working hours.

It appears from a parliamentary question asked in the Chamber by Mr De Kerkhove on 2 April 1873 that in spite of the discipline reigning in the workshops, there were difficulties. He added that these "difficulties" were inherent in situations where there were workers and masters, supervisors and subordinates, in short anywhere where there

³⁷ L. TAKSA, *La mobilisation et les espaces de résistance: à propos de la politique de l'espace dans les ateliers ferroviaires d'Eveleigh (Sidney) des années 1920 aux années 1960*, in *Ateliers et dépôts du Matériel ferroviaire: deux siècles d'histoire*, (Revue d'Histoire des Chemins de fer, Paris, 2003, n° 28-29) mentions the same location of the demonstrations. As she has access to more sources, she manages to better explain this location for the workers : cf ID., Political and industrial mobilization, workplace culture and citizenship at the New South Wales Railways and Tramways Department Workshop 1880-1932, in C. DIVALL (comp.) *Workshops, identity and labour*. Working Papers in Railway Studies, 3, Institute of Railway Studies, York, 1998. G. REVILL, *Railway Paternalism and Corporate Culture*, 'Railway Derby' and the Formation of the ASRS, in DIVALL, *Workshops*.

³⁸ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Mechelse Kronyck*, 20 November 1851.

³⁹ MB, 2 September 1854; 3 September 1854 and 4 September 1854.

were opposing interests. He asked the minister if it would not be better if a ‘*conseil des prudhommes*’ (labour tribunal) were set up for public enterprises to settle disputes between bosses and subordinates. As it was the city authorities that decided such matters, the minister could not intervene. A few years later, the governor of the province once again tried to persuade the city authorities of the usefulness of a labour tribunal, supported by the entrepreneurs. However, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century before such a tribunal was established in Mechelen.⁴⁰ The exact competence of this tribunal vis-à-vis public employees, however, is not quite clear to me.

Nor would it appear that the workmen at the Arsenal played a significant role in the political arena. One argument sometimes adduced to explain this is the prohibition of association. This is correct to the extent that for public employees it was prohibited by law to join a trade union. Presumably the punishment for doing so was dismissal. However, workers from the supply companies were not protected either. When the workers of Cabany, together with other workers, tried to set up a local section of the Belgian Workers Party (BWP), they did not get any support from the workers at the Arsenal. At regular intervals, meetings were announced at the gate of the Arsenal which, however, did not get much response, or none at all, from the railway personnel. After the city council elections of 19 October 1890, the election results were analysed in rather bitter terms. “*Het is maar dat zij hier niet kunnen wijzen op machtige samenwerkende maatschappijen, zoals in andere steden; de onverschilligheid der werklieden die in de werkhuizen van de staat, heeft daar een grote schuld aan; de drieduizend arbeiders uit het Arsenaal hangen nog voortdurend aan de sleep der burgerpartijen en schijnen maar niet te gevoelen dat zij ook in geen paradijs werken, maar wel in de galeien; hun mager loon dat zij ontvangen heeft hun nog niet tot vereniging kunnen brengen; slechts een klein deel van hun maakt deel uit van de samenwerkende maatschappij, welke alleen voor de staatsbediende is ingericht*”.⁴¹ [It is a fact that they do not indicate any powerful associations as is the case in other cities; the indifference of the state workshop workers is much to blame; the three thousand workers at the Arsenal are still on the apron strings of the conventional parties and do not seem to realise that they do not work in paradise either, but indeed in the galleys; their meagre wages have not yet urged them to unite; only a small fraction is part of the cooperative association, which is only established for the state employee]. In any case, it can be inferred from the few trade union press articles that have been preserved from the 19th century that political emancipation within the trade union organisations of the personnel of the railways, telegraph and post office received only sporadic attention. Only an article in the *Moniteur des employés* in 1886 came out in support of the struggle for the principle of one man, one vote. Only through individual voting rights would the labour movement be able to be represented in parliament.⁴²

⁴⁰ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Mechelse Courant*, 06 April 1873; HOUTHUYS, *Bijdrage*, p. 117.

⁴¹ *De Werker*, 11 January 1891, quoted in D. WOUTERS, *De Mechelse anarchisten (1893-1914) in het kader van de opkomst van het socialisme*, Mechelen, 1981, p. 14-15.

⁴² Bibliothèque Royale, *Le Moniteur des Employés*, 6 June 1886 and 20 June 1886. The novel *Het Rollende Leven* by Gustaaf Vermeersch refers several times to the trade union actions at the beginning of the 20th century. However, in most cases one can hardly speak of joint actions with the socialist party for universal franchise. Vermeersch’ efforts for the Union of train guards, which he established, also demonstrate that political efforts are negligible as compared with the interventions related to the working

The Arsenal was a fortress where the socialists did not manage to gain a foothold and where their propaganda remained without response. At a meeting for general suffrage, Willem Reuter called on the men of the Arsenal ‘*om het gouden kalf niet meer te dienen*’ [stop worship the golden calf]. At regular intervals, meetings were organised in ‘*s Lands Welvaren*, an inn at the Arsenal’s exit gate. When the workers left the workshop, the assembly was sounded and the meeting announced. In the *Mechelse Courant*, a local newspaper, the following was reported: “*Nieuwsgierig keken vele werklieden op. Gezel Gilis blies maar altijd voort, maar niemand voldeed aan de uitnoodiging. Een andere socialist doorliep de werkersrangen allen tot de meeting aanzettende, geen enkele werkman trad het ‘s Lands Welvaren’ binnen*” [Many workers looked up curiously. Comrade Gilis kept blowing the trumpet, but no one responded to the call. Another socialist went through the workers' ranks, asking them to join the meeting, but none of the workers entered the inn 's Lands Welvaren].⁴³ Karin Houthuys argues, possibly rightly, that the Arsenal was a bastion of liberalism. Allegedly, this was connected with efforts on the part of progressive liberals towards the introduction of universal suffrage, as a result of which they had among the workers built up an image of being a socially concerned and progressive party. *De Werker*, a socialist paper, took a very dim view of this in 1891 and also about the lack of strong socialist party structures such as cooperatives which could have had a politically mobilising effect. In contrast with the Arsenal, the socialist workers movement developed more from the supply companies, in particular from Cabany. The closure of Cabany in 1895 and the weak involvement of Arsenal workers meant that at the end of the 19th century the young socialist party enjoyed little support from factory workers. This is not altogether surprising. The Arsenal had its own fire brigade which served the workshop and the city and which, according to the local press, was pressed into service in Paris to extinguish the fires resulting from the Commune uprising. The steam fire engine...”*is vrijdag avond, met een twintigtal manschappen...naar Parijs overgevoerd, ten einde er die zoo betreuenswaardige brandrampen door de communisten teweeg gebracht, te helpen blusschen.*” [was transferred ... to Paris on Friday night, with some twenty men, in order to help putting out the so regrettable fires caused by the communists]. They returned home with heroic tales, the veracity of which was questioned by the local press.⁴⁴ What is clear is that the experience of those involved probably did not contribute to greater sympathy or a growing awareness of the workers’ struggle within the workshop’s walls.

This situation probably changed after the turn of the century. Not only were measures announced enabling public officials, and therefore railway employees, to join a trade union, but the young labour party also gained in importance. This is also clear from statements made in parliament which show that socialist demonstrations in support of general individual voting rights were prohibited but demonstrations by Catholic workers were not. There were plans for about 2 500 workers from the Arsenal taking part in this

conditions. Cf. G. VERMEERSCH, *Het Rollende Leven*, ID., *De Vlaamsche Treinwachter. Almanak voor het jaar 1910*, s.d., [1909], Antwerpen, and VAN HEESVELDE, *Rolling Life*.

⁴³ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Mechelse Courant*, 23 April 1893.

⁴⁴ Documentation De Mijlpaal, *Mechelse Courant*, 28 May 1871 and 4 June 1871; *Mechels Nieuws en Aankondigingsblad*, 4 June 1870.

demonstration. In any case, the sources show that the railway administration withdrew all leave on the relevant days and tried to keep the personnel at work as much as possible so as to undermine the success of the demonstrations.

Gustaaf Vermeersch's novel *Het Rollende Leven* [The Rolling Life] sketches a picture of the trade union and political involvement of train guards. There are occasional references to the general political background of the railways in the period from 1900 to 1910. Vermeersch's descriptions make it clear in any case that the Catholic party did not enjoy wide sympathy among railway workers, which may perhaps be explained from the protracted presence of Catholic ministers at the head of this policy sector. Shortly after Arie, the main protagonist in the novel, had been recruited by the state railways, the trainee supervisor asked him whether he had had any connections supporting him to get the job. Arie confirmed that the local priest had put in a good word for him, whereupon the supervisor "*na een lange wijle*" [after a long while] replied: "*er zijn er niet veel onder ons!*" [there aren't many among us]. Later on in the story, Arie would in Wallonia would meet Carna, an anarchist and freethinker who headed a team of train guards and who encouraged Arie to go back to reading "his books" again (meaning the trade union press). About these periodicals, Carna himself remarked that: "*daar liep het niet over theorieën of anarchie, het waren strijdartikelen om lotsverbeteringen te bekomen, om misbruiken aan te klagen, om te strijden voor het recht van de beamten. Het hielp niet veel, 't is waar, doch bekwam het geen onmiddellijk uitwerksel vanwege de staat, het deed de bedienden nadenken, redeneren, het bereidde de weg tot een aksie die nog verre in 't verschiet lag, doch die eenmaal komen zou. Men werkte toch voor het welzijn van iedereen;*"⁴⁵ [Those were not about theories or anarchy, those were articles of the struggle for a better fate, to denounce abuse, to fight for the rights of the civil servants. It is true that it did not help much, nor did it prompt immediate action from the State, but it did make the employees think, reason, it prepared the path for action, which was still far ahead, but which would come eventually. It was about working for the welfare of all people.] For reasons of literary style, it was probably necessary for Vermeersch to introduce an element of tension between those in charge (Catholic ministers, supervisors with nicknames such as Christ-in-civvies, etc.) and the subordinates, in this case train guards of the state railways, but what the author writes about this explicitly or in more cautious terms was certainly reflected in the Parliamentary Debates. In 1908-1909, the socialist Furnémont queried the Catholic railway minister Helleputte in parliament about the behaviour of the workshop supervisor in Tamines who used his influence as a line manager to pressurise subordinates into joining a Catholic trade union. To this end, the manager had invited a local priest to add weight to his authority. The question put to the minister was whether he agreed that priests were allowed to engage in political propaganda to prevent railway workers from joining workers' trade unions.⁴⁶ Since 1884, the Catholic party had been

⁴⁵ VERMEERSCH, *Rollende Leven*, I, p. 35 and ID, II, p. 118.

⁴⁶ Belgian Parliament, Chamber, Actes/Handelingen, 1908-1909, p. 2144, M. Furnémont questions the Minister of Railways, Postal Services and Telegraphy "sur les mesures qu'il compte prendre vis-à-vis d'un chef de service de Tamines ayant usé de son influence hiérarchique pour obliger ses subordonnés à faire partie d'un syndicat jaune" [about the measures he intends to take vis-à-vis a head of service of Tamines who used his hierarchic influence to oblige his subordinates to join a yellow trade union].

winning elections which had led to a reform of the administration with the introduction of a separate department for the railways which was headed consecutively by Van de Peerenboom (1884-1899), Liebaert (1899 to 1907) and Helleputte (1908-1910). It is not excluded that the Catholic party tried to expand its influence by intervening in this biotope, trying to involve the railway community, whose response was rather corporatist, in a process directed against the growing workers' movement and its emancipatory character, irrespective of the fact whether this movement was in railway circles supported by the BWP or by the progressive liberals.

However, there is a possible explanation other than viewing the Arsenal as a liberal bastion or as a political bastion at all. I formulate this possible explanation below as a hypothesis that needs to be corroborated. With their bureaucratic management system, the railways as a public enterprise constituted a specific biotope, a complex cultural entity which created its own, sometimes bourgeois, atmosphere. Earlier studies mostly assumed the growth of an organised trade union movement and the growth of a workers party which as institutions were both intended to empower the workers. The large group of railway personnel cannot really be qualified as working class on account of the relations it had with its employer and perhaps also because of the internal oppositions between the various occupations. It is likely that in many cases railway trade unions were formed per occupational group and not as an umbrella organisation, and the various groups often put highly specific sets of demands on the negotiating table; in most cases, they do not include universal suffrage. The demands mostly concerned working hours, a clothing allowance, improvement of particular working conditions, etc. Insufficient research has been carried out into the way such large occupational groups operated to reach definite conclusions as regards the contributions made by such occupational categories to the labour struggle in the 19th century. Moreover, a thorough knowledge of the various occupational categories within the group of railway personnel is required because of rivalries among these various occupations. In other words, far more research is needed to arrive at a better interpretation as to how these communities constituted themselves and what consequences of such communities were for local and national politics.⁴⁷

Some conclusions

Mechelen and the Arsenal have apparently always maintained a complex relationship with one another. Contemporaries describe it as a city within a city when discussing the rise of the enterprise and the large numbers of buildings they planned. In actual reality, the workshop was also a specific kind of city within the city, not so much because of the higher wages but because of the specific railway culture that was being created. It is not clear how workers from other sectors reacted to this because little research has been conducted into this aspect. What Georges Ribeill demonstrates with regard to French railway workshops and in particular regarding representation of this workers' world also applies to a considerable extent to the workers of the state railways at Mechelen. Quite soon after the establishment of a railway system, it became clear that this necessarily

⁴⁷ Cf. more specifically for the theoretical basis and related literature : TAKSA, *Workplace culture* and REVILL, *Railway Paternalism*.

went hand in hand with a specific labour organisation. A railway system is in fact an integrated system whose overall result depends not only on a variety of operational tasks but above all of the proper and reliable execution of these tasks. A small error or mistake, which in a different working environment would have little notable impact, may have catastrophic consequences in a railway system. Railway workshops are often far removed from the location where the service will eventually be provided, in particular between the origin and destination of the train. Not only is it necessary to carry out stringent checks on the way tasks are carried out, it should also be possible to determine who is responsible for any mistakes. In other words, it is not sufficient for railway workers to assimilate the standards for the performance of their tasks and to effectively apply them, their lives should keep pace with the rate at which a railway system operates. This is also the reason why the railways soon adopted recruitment procedures in which young people were offered lifetime employment, with particular specific advantages and benefits designed to ensure that the worker was bound to the company and which often touched the full life cycle of the personnel, starting with the birth allowance for children all the way to the death grant. According to Ribeill, it was the nature of the work that determined the way in which a railway culture and a railway company came into being.⁴⁸ Strict rules of employment combined with the gradual introduction of a number of benefits through which workers were bound to the company. Article 2 of the regulation cited, for instance, already provided that “*chaque service a ses agents... Ces agents, bien que distincts par la nature de leurs fonctions, se doivent mutuellement aide et assistance chaque fois qu'ils en sont requis*”. [each department has its workers... These workers, even though they do different types of work, are to offer each other mutual aid and assistance as required.] A similar railway community arose in Mechelen, revealing forms of dependence and identification between workers and the public authorities in two ways: through the railway workshop, the authorities generated prosperity and even philanthropy within the urban context, at times linked to local policy and a form of pride in one's own city on the one hand and cyclical events throughout the year, with the worker becoming involved in a number of social events such as city concerts and celebrations honouring local politicians, glorification of labour, etc., which in each case involved the work environment and the family. Such forms of paternalism could lead to an ideology of class cooperation rather than a militant attitude, a group spirit as railwaymen rather than the feeling of having opposing interests.⁴⁹ In a city where until the arrival of the central workshop there was no or little centralised industry, it may be assumed that the rise of such large concentrations of workers could bring about fundamental changes within the perception of the other workers. The question is therefore whether at the end of the 19th century the Catholic railway ministers contributed to a more paternalistic or even corporatist railway community or whether the rise of the railway community should be explained purely in the light of the technical nature of the railway system and the nature of the work involved.

⁴⁸ J.-L. ROBERT, *The social Group: three approaches to social history in France*, in *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 1997, 23, 2, P. 200-201. Cf. also the works by G. RIBEILL, *Le personnel des Compagnies de chemins de fer*, Paris, 1980, 3 dln. and C. CHEVANDIER, *Cheminots en usine, les ouvriers des Ateliers d'Oullins au temps de la vapeur*, Lyon, 1993.

⁴⁹ REVILL, *Railway Paternalism*, p. 40.

At institutional level, the city and the Arsenal worked together on specific projects from which both derived benefit. For instance, the Arsenal had an efficiently equipped fire brigade which systematically intervened in incidents alongside the city's own fire fighters, long before the city of Mechelen had its own fire brigade. Strangely enough, this railway fire brigade was also deployed against the Paris Commune, at least according to the sources consulted. There is no doubt that was not conducive to raising awareness among the Arsenal workers in Mechelen. Another aspect on which the city and the Arsenal management worked closely together, at least from the turn of the century, was technical training.

The city organised technical training courses in which railway personnel became involved as teachers in specific subjects. From year to year, particular departments were strongly attended by newly recruited railway employees.

As no detailed source material research as yet been conducted in the city's archives, it is not possible to make any statements as to the conditions under which these forms of service provision took place. Were they remunerated? Did the city offer other services in exchange? Also, the Arsenal's brass band at regular intervals organised marching concerts, bandstand performances, etc.

The introduction of a railway system undeniably contributed to major changes in spatial planning. Railways not only connect places, they also contribute proportionately to the fragmentation of space and the urban fabric as a result of the barrier effect of their infrastructure. Above all, however, the railways are conducive to urbanisation and the growth of the urban population, an impact that was further enhanced by the proximity of a major railway workshop. The advent of the railways was not only a burden to Mechelen, consequent upon the imperative spatial effects of the infrastructure put in place; there was also a very positive effect. The city authorities and local politicians worked hard to preserve the centrality of Mechelen within the railway system and maintain employment at the Central Workshop by solidly integrating it within the city. It gave rise to a specific spatial and demographic dynamism that is also encountered at similar establishments abroad. There is no doubt that these developments contributed to the economic prosperity of the city of Mechelen.