

The 1930s anti-war league in Netherlands and Flanders

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Anti-militarism in the 1920s was the spearhead of social democracy in the Netherlands and Belgium, and it was strongly supported by the trade union movement. However, their support was slowly but surely abandoned in the early 1930s, because it was a breakingpoint for the civil parties with whom they were seeking to form parliamentary coalitions. From this perspective the International Socialist Anti-War League (from now: League) was a reaction to the waning support for anti-militarism. The two initiators of the League, socialist war-veterans Frans Longville and Max Patteet, were disappointed in their own socialist veteran association, which was initially overtly anti-militarist but gradually abandoned this position. They wanted to revive strident anti-militarism in the form of a new mass organization and build bridges with both young people and people outside of social democratic movements. They aligned with Albert Einstein's statements in 1930, including the statement that war mobilisation would fail if only a few percent would ignore the mobilisation call.

From the spring of 1931 onwards, the League became a vehicle of the Antwerp Federation of the Belgium Labour Party, to oppose the national party's move towards accepting the policy of national defense. The national Labour Party leadership kept the League at arm's length, but it was tolerated in the 'people's houses' (the local accommodations of the Labour Party). Despite its founders initial intentions, the League struggled to recruit members outside of social democratic circles, and soon abandoned its radical pacifist stance in favor of an outspoken socialist position, in order to reconnect with the workers' movement. Revolutionary violence was no longer condemned from 1932 onwards.

In 1932 the League became involved in encouraging refusal of military service. This is usually seen through the Flemish-nationalist lens in historiography. The League picked up this issue when army recruit Pierre Van den Eeden refused to go to Wallonia with his military unit to quell the miner's strike. The League played a more important role in this movement of objectors than was assumed today: League members were prosecuted for incitement to refuse military service and several were jailed. Within the Labour Party, the League successfully pressed the party leadership to campaign for the release of conscientious objectors, and even for a bill to recognise conscientious objectors. However, the League's campaign for one jailed objector backfired when he turned out to be a communist mole. After this the Labour Party abandoned any further campaigning and forced the League to do the same.

Contacts with the Dutch Worker's Defense with the League led to a merger in 1932 and an extension of the League to the Netherlands. The Dutch Worker's Defense emerged in the early 1930s from the desire for a workers' militia within social democracy. Belgian and Dutch labour parties were unhappy with the internationalisation of the League - they saw it as a violation of their monopoly on international contacts. Nevertheless, the Dutch Worker's Defense played an important role in the League's evolution towards an anti-fascist militia, based on a militant culture with a corresponding

military style - badges, uniforms and banners. The League's anti-fascism boomed in 1933/1934, when fascism seemed to be on the rise at home and abroad. The League grew like wildfire and it presented itself as the third power within Social Democracy, next to the party and the trade unions. The League was a real menace for the nascent New Order movements in the Netherlands and Flanders, like Verdinaso, Flemish National Union and the National-Socialist Movement. After 1934 the League emphasized debate over violence as a means to combat fascism.

The League was popular among young socialists, and this brought it into conflict with the recognized socialist youth organisations in the Netherlands and Belgium. In Belgium this competition meant that the League did not manage to get a foothold in Wallonia, but on the other hand it was dominant in Flanders. In the Netherlands the competition led to hostility from Koos Vorrink, the leader of the official youth organisation of the Labour Party, who in 1934 became party chairman. He tried to infiltrate the League. There were also other issues, such as the League's assistance to German refugees, clandestine activities in Germany, and the aforementioned competition with the official youth group. Eventually the violent anti-fascism of the League was the immediate cause for the Labour Party to end their association with the League and forbid Labour Party members from also being members of the League.

In Flanders, the League became divided in 1934 - the League could not reconcile itself with the new direction of the Labour Party set through the so-called "Labour Plan" of Hendrik de Man, and some of its leaders left the League as a result. The Labour Plan reconciled the Labour Party and the trade union movement, but moved social democracy away from anti-fascism and anti-militarism, the League's main causes. In the long term it also meant a break with the mass mobilisation within the social democracy as advocated by the League, since government participation was the understated goal of the Labour Plan. The relationship between the League and the Labour Party was further weakened by their competition for militant members, and for readers for their new weekly papers.

By 1934 it became clear that the League had reached the limits of growth and that the association would remain geographically limited to Flanders and the Netherlands. The League was tempted by communism and actually got into left-socialist waters under the new leadership of Frans Liebaers. This course led to the rekindling of its anti-militarism in response to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. The campaign against Italy during the Abyssinia crisis led to a clash with the Labour Party, which was then part of the governing coalition. The remaining ties between the party and the League were broken with haste to prevent the actions of the League from impacting the party. The reason was a complaint from the Antwerp trade unions that the League usurping its role by calling for a wildcat strike.

In the Netherlands, after the break with the League, the Labour Party tried to keep the militant youth within the party by setting up its own militant branch. After its exclusion by the Labour Party, the Dutch League branch was infiltrated by communists and left-wing socialists. In Belgium, the League had already started a downturn prior to its exclusion by the party, but it continued to present the image of a mass movement for the outside world, not least in an international context where the Flemish League branch leader Frans Liebaers participated in left-wing socialist initiatives. Liebaers tried to continue to act as a bridge in the labor movement between communism and social democracy. He should not simply be lumped together with Trotskists, who were in fact hostile to Liebaers because he had forced them out of the League.

The League tried to play a role in the Netherlands and Flanders outside the protective wings of the party, but without its affiliation with social democracy the League lost its main source of members and publicity. The League succeeded in setting up its own premises, but suffered financial problems. The Spanish Civil War caused the growing disillusionment about the revolutionary aims of the League, as the revolution turned into a years-long destructive civil war, and as internal conflicts

broke out in the republican camp, where the left-wing socialists were being crushed by communists. Slowly, Liebaers threw all Marxist dogmas overboard.

By the time the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the League had lost a lot of its meaning. In the Netherlands, the League had already been forced to dissolve due to the prosecution of the leadership in 1938. In Flanders there had been no more annual conferences since 1937. The League was not even able to stage a meaningful opposition to mobilisation in 1939, because mobilisation was phased, and did not coincide with the outbreak of war. The real tragedy was by then that the League no longer had sufficient members to derail a mobilisation by means of massive refusal of military service, as initially intended.

Despite the militant anti-fascism of the League, the lure of the New Order was irresistible to some members of the League, especially after the occupation in 1940, when some chose to collaborate. On the other hand, many League members also ended up in the resistance. After the war many former League executives became prominent BSP politicians and ABVV trade union militants. In the 1950s and 1960s they played a dominant role in Flanders. However, there was no lasting anti-militaristic legacy from the League.

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P.S.

This article is an English summary of the author's Dutch-language book about the International Socialist Anti-war League (1931-1939), which appeared in 2018:

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