

50,000 Belgians march against plant closings and for social justice

by Dean Andromidas

More than 50,000 people marched through the small Belgian town of Tubise, on Feb. 2, protesting the planned closing of the town's steel mill. Dubbed the "Multi-Colored March," the demonstration notably received full support from the organizers of last October's "White March," which drew 350,000 participants in the streets of Brussels to protest government foot-dragging in the investigation of a pedophile-murder ring. The support for an "economic" protest from the parents of the child murder victims of pedophile Marc Dutroux, was the first, clearly successful, effort to broaden traditional trade union actions and unite the fight for economic and social justice.

The Tubise demonstration occurs in the context of a crescendo of European mass strikes, in response to escalating unemployment, austerity measures, and other catastrophic effects of the radical free market reforms now being implemented in western Europe, under the mandate of the European Union's Maastricht criteria, and in eastern Europe, under the "reform" dictates of the International Monetary Fund. In the same week, railway workers in the Czech Republic, the IMF's model East European free market economy, staged a walkout over plans to lay off more than 40,000. Health care and auto workers joined the walkout.

In Greece, heavily indebted farmers staged demonstrations demanding government debt relief. Greek truckers also staged strikes over wage and other issues. Dairy farmers in Italy, protesting low quotas dictated by the EU, have been conducting road blocks and other actions. France and Germany are also experiencing sporadic industrial strikes.

Deindustrialization imposed by Maastricht

The demonstration in Tubise was called to protest the planned closure of the Forges de Clabecq, one of the few remaining steel mills still operating in Belgium. The steel mill is based in the French-speaking province of Wallonia, which has traditionally been one of the leading steel-producing and heavy industry regions of Europe. In the 1970s, under the Davignon Plan—named for European Commission chairman Count Etienne Davignon—the region was deindustrialized, its steel mills dismantled and sold to China and other Asian countries.

Former steel barons are now among Europe's leading

speculators. A notable case is Albert Frère, a former steel baron based in Charleroi, who profited tremendously by the closure and sale of the steel industry. He is now chairman of Banques Bruxelles Lambert, the second largest bank in Belgium, and one of the most notorious speculators in European finance. Frère also owns one of Europe's largest media groups, including a large holding in Europe's first private television station, Radio Television Luxembourg.

With more than 30% unemployment, the region has the one of the highest jobless rates in Europe, and if the Forges de Clabecq factory closes, another 1,800 jobs will be lost. The major business in the region now is illegal drugs, which have flooded the area, and organized crime, generating an atmosphere of hopelessness and despair.

The shutdown of the steel plant is a supranational decision. The Belgian government was prepared to organized a \$49 million restructuring plan for the Forges de Clabecq factory, and a Belgian court had ruled that the factory, which is 51% owned by the provincial government of Wallonia, could not be closed. But the European Union, under the new powers conveyed by the Maastricht Treaty, ruled that the factory had to go.

The final decision that forced the closure was made by European Commission member Karel van Meirt, commissioner for competition. Van Meirt is a member of the Belgian Socialist Party, and happens to be one of the only party leaders who managed not to be hit with the many corruption scandals that have plagued the party.

Building a movement for economic justice

The Tubise demonstration represents an emerging broad-based movement which sees itself as a moral and political opposition to the radical free market policies. The demonstration was initiated by the factory council of the FGTB trade union, under the leadership of Roberto D'Orazio, the union's local president. The union is linked to the Belgian Socialist Party. Starting last December, without the help or approval of the national union or Socialist Party leadership, local union members travelled to other factories throughout the region, organizing support for the action. Then, just days before the scheduled demonstration, the parents of two of the children killed by pedophile Marc Dutroux, threw their support behind

the demonstration.

It must be remembered that the Dutroux case, which broke last August, has been the worst scandal in Belgian history, and has had a profound effect on the Belgian population (see *EIR*, Sept. 27 and Nov. 1, 1996). The case involved the sexual abuse and murder of four children, kidnapped by a pedophile ring led by one Marc Dutroux. Prosecution of the case revealed deep-rooted corruption that is believed to reach up to the highest levels of government and the political and economic elites, and extending beyond tiny Belgium's borders.

More than 150,000 people attended the funerals for the murdered girls. In September, Belgium's Foreign Minister Erick Deruecke shocked participants at a Stockholm conference on child sex exploitation by holding "ultra-liberal free-market economics" responsible for commercial child sex abuse, including the Dutroux pedophile murders. "It's the extreme consequence of an ultra-liberal economic world order, where even children can be bought and sold on the free market," he told the World Conference Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

Then, last October, in one of the largest demonstrations in Belgium's history, 350,000 people went into the streets of Brussels to protest the removal from the case of investigative judge Jean-Marc Connerotte. Connerotte had gained wide popularity, after having tracked down Dutroux and put him behind bars, along with several of his ring, including a former government minister, Alain Van der Biest. Then, at the request of Dutroux's attorneys, Belgium's highest court ordered him removed from the investigation, after ruling that his attendance at a fundraising dinner held by the victims' parents represented a failure on his part to remain impartial.

Within hours, the protests began, culminating with the "White March" in Brussels, so named because demonstrators wore white and carried white balloons to commemorate the victims' purity and innocence. The Brussels march sparked the spontaneous formation of "White Committees" throughout the country.

'Stop thinking we can't change the world'

In a remarkable interview in the Jan. 31 issue of *Le Soir*, Belgium's largest daily, Gino and Carin Russo, whose daughter Melissa was among the pedophile ring's victims, gave their support to the Tubise demonstration. Gino Russo is himself a steel worker, at another factory, and holds a position in the union factory council. In motivating his appeal, Russo called on the population "to stop being reasonable," stating that the struggle for employment and economic justice was part of the same fight for justice for the murdered children,

Gino Russo told *Le Soir*: "We fought like crazy, like utopians, against injustice, for our children, against accepting unemployment as inevitable. These three themes are now taken up in the 'march for jobs.'"

Carin Russo joined in: "During our daily struggle, we came to realize that the value of human beings and priority

for children were zero, compared to the weight of the institutions. In Clabecq, human considerations come only after economic rationales. . . . We have to begin by changing mentalities, priorities, and values. A minority of people place the value of money above everything else. The majority now gives more importance to the value of the human being. On this basis, we can rethink the rules of the world. At least I hope so."

Gino continued, "Both fights run up against the wall of fatalism. Political or economic decision-makers condition us into accepting this idea that it is inevitable. In order to cancel jobs, they go on and on about the rules of competition. When we were trying to find our children, they would always hide behind the secrecy of the judicial inquiry."

We are "trying to create a much greater solidarity, among families, workers, students, associations," he added. "To get things moving, you have to bring together all those of good will."

Although the national trade union leadership has yet to support the Tubise demonstrations, Gino Russo warned against "waiting for the results of the catastrophe before acting. . . . [The] political world lacks will power and the sense of responsibility. It gives in to the financiers. Money is what made Julie and Melissa die. Money kills employment. Economic or financial thinking disregards the value of human beings, without the slightest qualm. One thousand or 10,000 people are only a number. Jobs in families are done away with without taking into account their dramatic situation. The economy doesn't care about the social situation. A social Europe does not exist. In the value hierarchy, the social does not rate any higher than the child in our justice system."

Calling on Belgians to act as true citizens, Carin Russo said that if the people "want to prepare the future for their children, parents have to take the responsibility to wake up and become citizens, who want to make themselves heard. It is not enough to be shocked by the pictures, to cry in front of the TV, to talk to one's neighbor. We have to act. . . . To get involved in politics, means to give life to the society. . . . We must not be afraid."

"Don't make a speech in the corner café about how 'they're all rotten,' " her husband added. "Get involved in your destiny, in the life of the city."

The Russos concluded by encouraging people to become more like children: "To understand how everything is linked together, you have to ask the right questions. Look for the causes of serious injustice. Stop being reasonable. Stop thinking we can't change the world. . . . We have to become once again like children, who are always asking questions. Don't just accept. Of course, faced with the world economy, people feel very small in their Belgian village. But we can no longer accept being a pawn on a chessboard."

Whatever happens to the steel plant, a movement of a new kind has been created in Belgium, in which citizens are fighting to change the moral parameters of policy-making.