Siemens Herentals: longer hours for more pay

The 800 or so employees of Siemens in Herentals will henceforth be working 38 instead of 37 hours a week. In exchange, they are receiving a pay rise of 1% and are exacting a reduction in the number of planned redundancies. So, it looks like the local unions have secured important compensations. Just as Siemens has turned into a symbolic issue in Germany for negotiations between the two sides of industry, so the same appears to be happening in Belgium. The taboo issue of longer working hours has thereby also been broken through, and the consultation offers the prospect of a new industrial agreement between trade unions and employers in the autumn, says De Tijd. The unions, however, point out that the agreement cannot be generalised (FF).

Siemens Herentals is the first Belgian company to follow the example of a number of international colleagues. In Germany and the Netherlands, the staff of several major companies have in recent months agreed to work longer hours for the same pay. Siemens Germany set the tone. The employees there agreed to an increase in working time from 35 to 40 hours. In exchange, production is not being moved.

The Belgian companies call the international examples a precedent. The Federation of Belgian Businesses (VBO) is advocating the introduction of the 40-hour week without any wage increase. The trade unions are opposed to the idea, although there are cracks in the opposition here and there. The 40-hour working week was also on the agenda at Marichal Ketin in Liège and the white-collar workers’ union LBC announced that they are prepared to work half an hour more at Fortis. Siemens Herentals is the first company actually to have taken the step. ‘We are the first company to authorise an extension of working time,’ confirmed Leo Lauwersyen of the LBC. However, he refused to talk of a precedent. ‘We secured important compensations,’ he stressed. ‘This is not an example of working time being lengthened with pay being kept the same.’

The lengthening in working time is restricted to two years and will be assessed after one year. Also important is the fact that the management offers job security until the end of September 2005, and that some fifty jobs are being saved. Finally, the management agreed to a gross wage increase of 1%.

INTRODUCTION

Now that the trade union representation and regional elections are over, the social partners and the politicians are free to think and plan in the rather longer term. As was widely expected, the great debate is the reform of the social security system, which has been raging for some time in neighbouring countries, has now entered here. Traditionally the idea is to test new ideas with the public and in the political field, via the press. The Belgian employers’ organisation VBO did not wait for August, however, and in July launched a four-year career-end master plan. This firmly advocates the abolition of early retirement. The VBO proposes a five-year period during which people taking early retirement receive on top of employment benefit. The reasoning is that this will prompt them to look for work. Keeping them out of the labour market for longer is the best way of combating the growing hole in the social security system. The social partners agree on that, but the previous government did not manage to do this. Quite the reverse, since the proportion of over-50s in the unemploy-ment statistics has continued to grow since 2003.

In August the VBO again put the wind up the trade unions with a proposal to introduce a 40-hour week without any wage increase, after the fashion of the Siemens group in Germany, and a little later with the demand for a wage freeze and a relaxation of the overtime regulations. The VBO invariably argues that the competitiveness of Belgium’s companies is being undermined by a wage cost handicap of 8% to 10% compared with companies operating in Belgium’s neighbouring countries.

The VBO’s offensive is not without its reasons. The autumn will see the talks between unions and employers for a new agreement on wage and employment conditions in the private sector for the period 2005-2006. The employers appear to be ready set on deciding what goes on the agenda, but the unions are beginning to react. In Knack (1 September) Christian, Socialist and Liberal trade union leaders claim that the employers only seem to be concerned about cost reductions and hardly talk about job creation at all. They oppose the abolition of early retirement and are on the lines of the Scandinavian model, in favour of more training for older employees. They also find the demands for a longer working week and greater flexibility exaggerated. They point out that Belgian employees already work longer hours than French, German and Dutch workers and that Belgium’s social security system is one of the most flexible countries in the world. In an interview in De Standaard (2 September), Luc Cortebeeck (ACV), the most important union leader in the country, criticised the employers’ offensive, which he says is unnecessarily provoking the unions’ grass-roots and thereby endangering the talks. Yet the compromise agreement reached on 2 September in the Siemens plant in Herentals seems to have broken through the taboo on the lengthening of working hours, reports De Standaard (3 September). So, the industrial climate this autumn might not be as hot as many commentators are expecting.

Frank Vandeaveleye • editor in chief
Discord between regions over budget policy

Van Cauwenbergh [PS] wants Belgium to drop the strict European budget rules of the Stability Pact

At the consultative committee of the governments of the regions and communities and the Federal Government, Wallon Minister-President Van Cauwenbergh (PS) sparked a heated debate on the subject of the budget policy to be pursued. Van Cauwenbergh wants Belgium to drop the strict European budget rules of the Stability Pact. Why should Belgium come up with a balanced budget if its neighbours – the Netherlands, France and Germany – do not do so, he wondered. The fact that Belgium’s debt of 100% of GNP is many times higher than that of those countries was clearly irrelevant in his view. Both the Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD & V) and Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) regard this line of thought as not open to discussion. Their standpoint was that Flanders has always made the largest contribution to the federal debt-reduction process and is now demanding greater budgetary discipline from Wallonia. Nevertheless an agreement still has to be reached. Under the leadership of federal Budget Minister Johan Vande Lanotte, a working group is determining the commitments of the different governments in respect of the Belgian debt reduction for the period 2006-2011. Finally, the governments also have to reach agreement on a budget proposal for 2005. The Budget Minister has already warned that a budget deficit of 0.6% might have to be removed. But Wallon and French-speaking governments excluded any extra budgetary efforts in 2005. After all, the regions have an agreement that established their budgetary efforts for the period between 1999 and 2005 (FF).

Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD & V) has already bared his teeth on this matter. Flanders has made a major effort in recent years to reduce the federal debt by itself recording substantial surpluses. The Flemish Government therefore spends less money than is available, so that a part of the budget can flow back to the federal coffers. In the same period the French-speaking Community and the Walloon Region have had trouble achieving break-even, let alone a surplus. According to Leterme, that creates a distorted situation, which Flanders will not continue to accept. Therefore he also wants to bring up the commitments for 2005 again. ‘Flanders is prepared to keep these promises and even to supply the extra EUR 100 million requested by the Audit Office. But this must be on condition that the Francophones also make an effort. And there is vagueness on that point,’ says his spokesperson Lies Deckers.

According to Leterme, a more flexible budgetary policy, such as Van Cauwenbergh is proposing, is irresponsible. ‘A lax budgetary policy only puts a noose around the neck of future generations. The past has shown us that,’ said spokesperson Deckers. Verhofstadt backs up Leterme on this point, and has suggested the possibility of penalties for those who fail to comply with the agreements, although there are not yet any specific proposals. An agreement has to be reached within just two weeks.

A poor medal tally for Belgium in Athens

Three medals – a gold for Justine Henin in tennis and bronze medals for Axel Merckx in cycling and Ilse Heylen in judo. That is the lean crop that Belgium came away from the Olympic Games in Athens with. The country had won five medals in Sydney, and six in Atlanta. The leader of the Olympic delegation and former medalist Robert Vande Walle has since drawn his conclusions, and announced that he would be tendering his resignation. In De Morgen (28 August) he blames the inadequate support given to top-class sportsmen in Belgium. The sports director of the Belgian Olympic and Interfederal Committee (BOIC) Eddy De Smedt put the ‘substandard performances’ into perspective somewhat. At the closing press conference on 28 August, he pointed out that in Athens Belgium had reached thirteen finals, compared with only seven in Sydney. Whereupon a journalist asked whether, with 16 top-ten placings compared with 20 in Sydney, Belgium had not in fact done worse. There again, on the other hand Belgium climbed from 55th to 51st place in the overall medal table. It all depends on how you look at it. Yet a comparison with the Netherlands (22 medals) or even with European countries such as Switzerland and Norway, which have far fewer inhabitants, does show a very adverse balance. Meanwhile Sports Minister Bert Anciaux has confirmed in De Morgen (29 July) that the ‘Olympic dream’ of having Flanders compete as a candidate to stage the 2016 Games had not yet disappeared. Anciaux first wants to examine what the sporting value – and not the economic value – of such an initiative could mean for Flemings (FF).

The BOIC largely subscribes to Van de Walle’s view. There is simply the feeling that the former judoka is not being quite patient enough, and has lost sight of the fact that sports administration is no longer a national competence but is the ‘property’ of the Communities, as a result of which a national top sports institute would ‘alas’ be impossible. So it’s all hands on deck for Sports Minister Bert Anciaux, who has already promised to work out the action plan for top-class sport that the previous Flemish Government set up.
Olympic Games

Olympic gold for Jacques Rogge

A

Although the overall balance of Athens 2004 was not so brilliant for Belgium, there were nonetheless some redeeming features. These include the medallists (Justine Henin, Axel Merckx, Ilse Heylen) themselves of course, led by Justine Henin in a class of her own, but also the achievements of Kim Gevaert in reaching the final of the 200 metres and of the Belgian women’s 4x100m sprint relay team in reaching the final in their discipline, plus the fourth-place finishes for triathlete Kathleen Smet and Roel Paulissen in mountain biking, and the fact that the pair D’haene-Maesen and Tim Maeyens reached the finals of kayak and skiff respectively. However, De Morgen also awards a gold medal to Jacques Rogge, the Belgian chairman of the IOC, who enjoyed a faultless sixteen days (FF).

HANS VANDEWEGHE • DE MORGEN • 28 AUGUST

For Rogge these have been an excellent Games, and at no point has he made any secret of that. In the week preceding the Games he was already able to prove to a large degree that he had been quite right. ‘I have always said that things would not be easy, but that the Greeks would nonetheless stage excellent Games. They’ve kept their word’. Overall his assessment was therefore positive. ‘Good organisation, general satisfaction, well-filled stadiums from 15 August onwards, fine sport and excellent though not exaggerated security. Athens sold more tickets than Barcelona in 1992 and Seoul in 1988. What is more, I gather that television viewing figures worldwide have risen by an average of 15 percent’. He regards his greatest satisfaction undoubtedly as being the Olympic record in the war on doping. At the time of going to press, 25 athletes had been caught having used a variety of products. ‘For the time being there’s no case of anyone using growth hormones or EPO, but I put that down to the deterrent effect. The total number will increase further. We’re continuing to step up the fight against doping. If the governments now also subscribe to the Wada doping code in the next Olympics, we will definitely be on the right path’.

WWW.OLYMPIC.BE

SPORTS AND EDUCATION

1 SEPTEMBER

Education minister speaks in conciliatory terms

Vandenbroucke announced that he wants in particular to pursue a prudent policy and avoid conflicts with the Catholic education umbrella organisation

On 1 September some 1.1 million schoolchildren will be going back to school again in Flanders. They will be welcomed by more than 100,000 teachers, who will once again guide them through their syllabuses for another school year. For De Standaard and De Tijd (1 September), it is an opportunity once again to recall the dedication and reliability of Flemish teachers. Primary and secondary education in Flanders come out top in international comparative studies, and Flemish surveys reveal that of all the professions, teachers elicit most respect among the population. And yet the government does not always make things easy for them. Teachers are weighed down by a mountain of administrative obligations such as the completion of reports and records, which often increase the workload unnecessarily. Education Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) is aware of that. In a ministerial circular to teachers and in interviews in De Tijd, De Morgen and De Standaard (1 September), he outlines the main themes of his policy, in which reduction of red tape is one of the top priorities. Priority is also to be given to the upgrading of vocational and technical training schools, the attractiveness of teaching as a career, and the career-end problem. Vandenbroucke, who with Education will be managing some 41% of the entire Flemish budget, announced that he wants in particular to pursue a prudent policy and avoid conflicts with the Catholic education umbrella organisation and the trade unions. Those were the order of the day under his predecessor Marleen Vanderpoorten during her first years in the post (FF).

RUUD GOOSENS/KIM HERBOTS • DE MORGEN • 1 SEPTEMBER

The brand new Education Minister is using 1 September to make it clear that he does not want to slip into the debates and arguments of the previous legislature. ‘I want to look to the future now’. During the previous purple-green legislature, there had been a lot of bluster about the plans for a blurring between the education systems (Catholic, Community, province, municipality), of which the VLD in particular showed itself to be a fervent advocate. In the Catholic education system, and chiefly therefore in rue Guimard, the headquarters of the Catholic education network, every initiative for a blurring of the networks was considered as downright provocation. Vandenbroucke is now focusing on sending messages of peace to the umbrella organisations in the education sector. And yet intrinsically Vandenbroucke is not taking a completely different direction from that of his predecessor Marleen Vanderpoorten. The SP.A minister is also in favour of co-operation between the systems. Before the end of the legislature he also wants to introduce a different financing structure that is not based on the Flemish Education System’s network structure. Vandenbroucke is sending out slightly less conciliatory messages to the trade unions. This autumn he has to have talks on a new collective labour agreement. A few years ago, after various strikes, the unions secured a linear wage increase of 3%, and the SP.A minister makes no secret of the fact that this is no longer possible.

THE NEW FLEMISH GOVERNMENT, MINISTERS AND PORTFOLIOS

YVES LETEMME (CD&V) • MINISTER-PRESIDENT INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS, FISHING, AGRICULTURE AND COUNTRY POLICY
INGE VEROYT (CD&V) • MINISTER FOR WELFARE, FAMILY AND CARE
KRIS FEETERS (CD&V) • MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
FRANK VANDENBROUKE (SP.A) • DEPUTY MINISTER-PRESIDENT, EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT
BERT ANCAUX (S.P.I.R.I.T.) • MINISTER FOR CULTURE, YOUTH AFFAIRS AND SPORT
KATHLEEN VAN BREEPT (SP.A) • MINISTER FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND SOCIAL ECONOMY
FIENJTE MOERMAN (VLD) • DEPUTY MINISTER-PRESIDENT, ECONOMIC AFFAIRS, INNOVATION AND FOREIGN TRADE
DIRK VAN MECHelen (VLD) • MINISTER FOR THE BUDGET, FINANCE AND TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING
MAENO KEULEN (VLD) • MINISTER FOR HOUSING, INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND INTEGRATION POLICY
CEERT BOURGEOIS (N-VA) • MINISTER FOR THE MEDIA, THE CIVIL SERVICE, FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TOURISM

FOCUS ON FLANDERS • 28 August – 3 September 2004 • Number 29
Flemish Government opts for realism and affordability

WITHIN THE LIMITED BUDGETARY SCOPE THE GOVERNMENT WANTS ABOVE ALL TO IMPROVE THE ENTERPRISE CLIMATE AND CRANK UP EMPLOYMENT

FF EDITORIAL OFFICE

On 20 July Yves Leterme (CD&V), after five weeks of negotiations, was able to present the coalition agreement for 2004-2009 to the Flemish Parliament. The fact that the negotiations took somewhat longer than in Brussels and Wallonia can be put down, according to Leterme, to a concern to make proposals that were attainable and affordable. For the coming five years the government has EUR 4 billion for new measures. But this scope for policy making only comes into play from 2007 onwards. For the near future, saving will be the order of the day. This year, for example, the ministers together will have to make structural savings to the tune of EUR 150 million, and further savings of EUR 200 to 300 million on one-off items in their departments. Within the limited budgetary scope the government wants above all to improve the enterprise climate and crank up employment. In exchange for the right to a job, affordable housing, education and care, the new government is establishing a number of obligations for Flemings and newcomers. Hence the title of the coalition agreement: ‘Giving confidence, taking responsibility’.
Meanwhile Flemish trade and industry, through the employer organisations Unizo and VOKA, has reacted positively to the coalition agreement. The emphasis on ‘enterprise’, the company-friendly tax system and the administrative simplification for SMEs leave them satisfied. The trade unions also expressed their satisfaction with the considerable attention given to employment and the new government’s intention to involve the organisations of the self-employed and small traders more in matters of policy.

On 22 July Yves Leterme (CD&V) was sworn in at the palace as the new Flemish Minister-President. That same day the ten ministers of his government took their oaths in the Flemish Parliament. Leterme, who in addition to the post of Minister-President also has responsibility for Institutional Reforms and Agriculture, is joined by fellow party members Inge Vervotte as minister for Welfare, Family and Care and Kris Peeters as minister for the Environment and Public Works. Peeters’ appointment was a surprise and came up against some opposition from within the CD&V group in the Flemish Parliament. Peeters had hitherto been the CEO of Unizo (the organisation for entrepreneurs and the self-employed) and pinched the post from under the nose of former minister and parliamentary party leader in the Flemish Parliament Eric Van Rompuy.
Leterme is flanked by the Deputy Minister-President Frank Vandenbroucke (SPA), who combines the Education, Training and Employment portfolios, and Fientje Moereman (VLD), who takes over Economic Affairs, Innovation and Foreign Trade from her party colleague Patricia Ceysens who becomes VLD parliamentary party leader in the Flemish Parliament.

Bert Anciaux (Spirit) returns after a couple of years to Culture and Youth Affairs and also takes on Sport. Kathleen Van Brempt (SPA) becomes minister for Equal Opportunities and Social Economy.
The two VLD ministers Dirk Van Mechelen (Budget, Finance and Town and Country Planning) and Marino Keulen (Housing) remain at their posts, although the latter also takes on Internal Affairs and Naturalisation. Newcomer Geert Bourgeois (N-VA) becomes minister for the Media, the Civil Service, Foreign Affairs and Tourism.

WWW.VLAANDEREN.BE/REGERING

Formation of Brussels government completed on 12 July

A good week before the Flemish Government negotiators, the six negotiating parties in Brussels – Flemish and French-speaking Socialists (SPA-Spirit), Flemish Liberals (VLD), Flemish and French-speaking Christian Democrats (CD&V and CdH) and French-speaking Greens (Ecolo) – had already reached an agreement on the formation of a government.
The brand new Brussels Minister-President Picqué (PS) called the agreement an ‘ambitious urban project’, in which housing and employment are central themes. On the employment front the Brussels Employment Office (BDGA) has been instructed to work more closely with its Flemish and Walloon counterparts. In its support to job seekers in their search for work, the BDGA should also maintain better contacts with the business community. As regards compliance with the language legislation governing the recruitment of contract workers in municipalities and public social welfare centres (OCMWs), a compromise has been reached. From now on the Brussels municipalities can hire monolingual contract workers from the moment they can demonstrate that no more bilingual candidates can be found, and provided that the bilingual service in the department in question can continue to be guaranteed.

In addition the Brussels Government wants to build 5,000 dwellings, of which 70% will be in the form of local authority housing, and it is also requesting authority for the development of the European quarter in consultation with the European institutions.
The biggest sticking point in the negotiations was – needless to say – the day and night flights over Brussels. On 11 July the negotiators reached agreement. It was decided that the federal distribution plan devised by former Transport Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit) would be reviewed, together with the Flemish and Walloon Regions and the Federal Government.

WWW.BRUSSEL.irisnet.be
**POLITICS**

**Government formation**

**Verhofstadt IIb strengthens position of VLD**

**KAREL DE GUCHT LET HIMSELF BE PERSUADED BY VERHOFSTADT AND DE WEAEL TO GIVE UP HIS CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE VLD IN EXCHANGE FOR THE MINISTERIAL POST OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

With an impressive government reshuffle, federal Prime Minister Verhofstadt has strengthened the position of his own party, the VLD, at federal level. In all the new government has five new ministers and three state secretaries. The most striking changeover concerned the successor to Foreign Affairs Minister Louis Michel [MR] after the latter's departure to the European Commission. Karel De Gucht let himself be persuaded by Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Interior Minister Patrick Dewael [VLD] to give up his chairmanship of the VLD in exchange for the vacant ministerial post. Outgoing Minister-President of the Flemish Government Bart Somers takes over the party chairmanship from him. A second important shift within the VLD is that of Marc Verwilghen to Economic Affairs. Verwilghen had hitherto held the development co-operation portfolio, which he hands over to Armand De Decker (MR). He is taking over Economic Affairs from his party colleague Fientje Moerman, who moves to the Flemish Government. In the SPA-Spirit cartel, Frank Vandenbroucke, Bert Anciaux and Kathleen Van Brempt move from the federal level to the Flemish Government. Federal Minister Freya Vanden Bossche [SPA] takes over at Employment from Frank Vandenbroucke and hands over her Environment portfolio to Bruno Tobback, previously SPA parliamentary faction leader in the Flemish Parliament. Former Flemish Government Minister Renaat Landuyt [SPA] takes over Transport from Bert Anciaux [Spirit], whilst Spirit chairperson Els van Weert becomes State Secretary for Sustainable Development and Social Economy.

Despite their electoral defeat, the VLD, with its Verhofstadt/De Gucht/Dewael triumvirate, now holds three key positions in the Federal Government. De Morgen [19 July] reports that with the reshuffle the Prime Minister wants to indicate that he is not willing to submit passively to the dynamic of the regional governments with their different composition. After all, in the Flemish regional government the CD&V-N-VA forms the strongest grouping, and in Wallonia and Brussels the Walloon Liberals have been replaced by Christian-Democrats. This means that there is less chance of the Christian-Democrats coming into the Federal Government in the autumn, says De Morgen. De Standaard [19 July] calls the reshuffle of the Federal Government a transformation from a 'B' team into an 'A' team.

**FLEMISH CELEBRATION DAY**

**Living together in respect is central message in 11 July speeches**

**FF EDITOR**

It was not the disputes between Flemings and Francophones over the linguistic divide but community problems within Flanders itself that received most attention in the speeches given by outgoing Minister-President Bart Somers [VLD] and the Speaker of the Flemish Parliament Norbert De Batselier [SPA]. According to Somers [De Tijd, 12 July], a great deal more effort will be needed to get Flemings living together in mutual respect with non-native speakers, Muslims and other immigrants. Both De Batselier and Somers also talked about the need to restore credibility to politics. Politicians must once again be bold enough to say that not all individual wishes can be met, according to the Speaker of the Parliament, and they must keep their political squabbling private. For Somers, greater importance should once again be given to results rather than loud pronouncements. However, the outgoing Minister-President did not fail to bring up the forthcoming community talks with the Francophones. A classic tripartite government of Liberals, Socialists [with the left-wing liberal Spirit] and Christian Democrats [with the Flemish National party N-VA] enjoys wide support among the Flemish population and should make it clear to the Francophones that Flanders is not joking, he says.

In his speech N-VA chairman Geert Bourgeois advocated a Flemish 'super ministry' of Foreign Affairs, which would include foreign affairs, foreign trade, cultural relations and development co-operation. On the occasion of the Flemish celebration day, outgoing Minister for Foreign Policy Patricia Ceyssens [VLD] held a meeting with the foreign ambassadors. She presented the results of a mini-survey sent to 170 embassies. According to the 55 ambassadors who sent back an answer, Flanders' great strength is its hardworking, well-trained and multilingual population. The region also has a number of other strong points, such as the considerable sense of enterprise, the presence of high-tech companies and the central location in Europe. Together with its wide range of cultural attractions, this location is an asset that makes the region attractive for logistics companies, hubs and distribution centres. Minus points are this country's complex political structure and the fact that the outlook of Flemings is too often directed at themselves and not enough at the outside world, according to the ambassadors. They regard the greatest threat to be ultra-nationalism and the election victory of the far right Vlaams Blok.

www.flanders.be
Ijzer pilgrimage relaxed but short on inspiration

WALTER BAETEN argued in favour of an independent Flemish state, which could take part in the European Union as a fully-fledged member.

A round 3,000 moderate pro-Flemings turned up on Sunday 29 August for the 77th Ijzer Pilgrimage in Diksmuide. The right-wing hard-liners of the Vlaams Blok and their entourage have pulled out for good. They have been organising their own meeting for some years now, the Ijzer Watch, in Steenstraete, where the tone of the speeches is tougher and where the war past of the collaborators, among other things, is also defended. This has resulted in the atmosphere at the Ijzer Pilgrimage becoming considerably more peaceful and relaxed, but also tamer and duller, according to many of those attending. Members of the Flemish-National alliance (N-VA), in particular, feel that it is all too respectable. In fact the party has become a member of the Flemish Government as an alliance partner with the Christian-Democratic CD&V, but that does not mean that its members are on the same wavelength as the other pro-Flemish parties, Spirit and CD&V. Walter Baeten, chairman of the Ijzer Pilgrimage Committee, nonetheless did his very best to sound combative. He argued in favour of an independent Flemish state, which could take part in the European Union as a fully-fledged member, just like the Czech Republic or Latvia. At the top of the list of Flemish demands we find – more topical than ever – the immediate splitting of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral district. (FF).

WOUTER VERSCHELDEN • DE STANDAARD 30 AUGUST

‘A bit tame.’ That was the reaction of many pilgrims. With around 3,000 participants, their numbers have also dropped to an all-time low. The well-choreographed ceremony, with the constantly recurring key words of peace, freedom and tolerance, did not really hit home. The applause was almost always slow in coming. Baeten nonetheless did his best to whip up the audience. ‘Flemish politicians, keep to your word,’ was Baeten’s way of reminding the parties of the Flemish Government of their promise to split the constituency and legal district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde immediately, without any (financial) consideration. ‘Be aware that the credibility of Flemish politics is at stake’.

Earlier in the ceremony the theme of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde had already been referred to extensively. A number of mayors from the Brussels Periphery, including Michel Dooms (CD&V) from Gooik and Lieve Vanlinthout (CD&V) from Sint-Pieters-Leuven, unfurled a banner and, amid loud applause, demanded the immediate splitting of the constituency.

Baeten addressed his words directly at the Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V), who himself was not present on account of family commitments. ‘You represent the Flanders that in great majority desires greater independence. We are counting on you.’

Baeten also asserted that Flanders could become a fully-fledged member of the European Union, ‘just like the Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Czechs, Slovaks and Slovenes. Since Europe only accepts states and not regions, the only logical step is for Flanders to become a fully-fledged state,’ he said.

Baeten also made a somewhat symbolic attack on the Sport Minister Bert Anciaux (Spirit), and in so doing aimed above all to prove that he was not a Spirit man. In the wake of the defection of Baeten’s predecessor Lionel Vandenberghe to Spirit two years ago, many pilgrims feel that there is still a political label stuck to the organising committee. The section at the front of the meadow reserved for prominent figures is still to a large degree peopled by Spirit members. The CD&V delegation was clearly smaller.

Like last year, the N-VA was still at the back on the meadow, ‘by way of a silent protest at the overly tame proceedings’. Party chairman Bart De Wever: ‘My fear is that the N-VA militants would pull out after the dull happening of last year has been confirmed. The chairman’s speech was indeed more combative this year, but I fear it is a case of too little, too late.’

WWW.IJZERBEDEVAART.BE

Minister Verwilghen wants closure of nuclear power stations to be open to review

The new federal Economic Affairs Minister Marc Verwilghen (VLD) has immediately realised, in his first month in the job, that energy weighs heaviest in his portfolio.

Verwilghen regards the guaranteeing of energy supplies, the availability of sources of energy and the control of prices as the main assignment. The minister feels that a study into energy requirements through to 2015 is absolutely essential in order, among other things, to obtain a better idea of the investments needed. According to Verwilghen, it is also necessary to gain a better perception of the role played by nuclear power stations in the provisioning of the country. Belgium has scheduled a discontinuation of nuclear energy from 2015. But the Economic Affairs and Energy Minister points out that Scandinavia is moving in a completely different direction. There, investments in nuclear energy are being cranked up. A social fund for under-privileged fuel-oil users and a genuine liberalisation of the electricity market are two other priorities for the minister.

DE STANDAARD • 2 SEPTEMBER

The new federal Economic Affairs, Energy, Foreign Trade and Research Policy Minister, Marc Verwilghen [VLD] has immediately realised, in his first month in the job, that energy weighs heaviest in his portfolio.

Verwilghen regards the guaranteeing of energy supplies, the availability of sources of energy and the control of prices as the main assignment. The minister feels that a study into energy requirements through to 2015 is absolutely essential in order, among other things, to obtain a better idea of the investments needed. According to Verwilghen, it is also necessary to gain a better perception of the role played by nuclear power stations in the provisioning of the country. Belgium has scheduled a discontinuation of nuclear energy from 2015. But the Economic Affairs and Energy Minister points out that Scandinavia is moving in a completely different direction. There, investments in nuclear energy are being cranked up. A social fund for under-privileged fuel-oil users and a genuine liberalisation of the electricity market are two other priorities for the minister.
Vandenbroucke tackles bottleneck professions

The Flemish labour market has some 140 professions in which vacancies are not being filled, whilst the number of people out of work has risen appreciably in recent years. Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A), the Flemish Government Education and Employment Minister, therefore wants to focus on getting vacancies in these so-called ‘bottleneck professions’ filled. He wants to get the branches of industry involved in channelling more job seekers towards vacancies for construction workers, truckers, computer scientists, bakers or engineers. The Flemish government is taking the first step, giving job seekers a premium of between EUR 150 and 250 if they follow a course leading to one of the bottleneck professions or trades. (FF)

EVELYN HENS • DE TIJD • 31 AUGUST

Vandenbroucke is picking up the thread of the federal employment conference. The federal social partners and the governments agreed in October to channel 10,000 extra people into a bottleneck profession via training courses. ‘We are now a year on and we must fulfill that ambition’, says Vandenbroucke.

He emphasises that the issue of the bottleneck professions calls for a concentrated approach from both the governments and the sectors. On Friday the Flemish Government took an initial step, approving a draft decree on the success premiums. Job seekers who follow a course that leads them into a bottleneck profession will be entitled to a premium from 1 September. Those who follow a course of between 100 and 400 hours will receive EUR 150 when they are awarded their diploma, whilst anyone following a course of more than 400 hours will receive EUR 250. Job seekers without a secondary education diploma will be paid the premium if they follow a training course that leads to a profession. The website of the Flemish Employment Office (www.vdab.be) can be consulted for the training courses for which premiums are paid. The measure will cost the government EUR 3 million.

Vandenbroucke is expecting the business sectors to assume their responsibility, too.

He aims to conclude as many sectoral agreements as possible, in which the branches of industry indicate the ways in which they will endeavour to lead as many people as possible into the bottleneck professions. Vandenbroucke points to the example of the supplementary joint representation committee of employees which for some years now has been paying EUR 750 to students who opt for an accounting, secretarial or technical course of study. ‘I don’t expect all sectors to adopt a similar approach. They can also invest in extra training. But they should give a substantial impetus,’ says Vandenbroucke.

WWW.VDAB.BE

Two-week-long Klara Festival in Brussels

The co-operation with a classical music broadcasting station forms part of a repositioning operation on the part of the Festival of Flanders

The Klara Festival is being held in Brussels from 7 to 22 September, with major names such as directors Zubin Metha, Philippe Herreweghe and Ivan Fischer or the Romanian soprano Angela Gheorgiou. The festival is built around the central theme of madness, ‘La Follia’, and is a co-operation between The Festival of Flanders and Klara, the classical music and culture radio station run by the public broadcasting corporation VRT. The co-operation with a classical music broadcasting station forms part of a complete repositioning operation on the part of the Festival of Flanders. To this end artistic director Bert Schreurs sought inspiration in Montpellier, where the festival works in conjunction with France Musiques, and in London, where the BBC participates in the Proms concerts. Knack outlines how it has grown (FF).

LUCAS HUYBRECHTS • KNACK • 1 SEPTEMBER

The Festival of Flanders is a worthy institution and has done fantastic things for Brussels in the field of music. It was a supplement to the Palais des Beaux-Arts, which suffered from a lack of innovation and progress. New groups, new directors and in particular new ways of thinking about music: you’d hear them all in the festival before they subsequently filtered through to the annual programming of the PBA. However, in time the PBA was reborn and repackaged Bozar. Paul Dujardin instigated a process of modernisation and renewal, which meant that the Festival’s former function was undermined, since the PBA was now hosting a festival all year round. So the Festival of Flanders had to reposition itself. The artistic director discovered the co-operation of France Musiques with the Festival of Montpellier, and of the BBC with the Proms concerts in London. What is played in the concert halls can be heard on the radio, and vice versa.

For this kind of operation in Flanders, Klara was the obvious partner. But if the festival wanted to create a new profile for itself, the venue also has to be adapted. The event had become fused with the Henri Leboeuf hall in the PBA. In order to break through that entwining, and to reach a wider public, other Dutch-speaking partners were sought. This honour falls this year to La Follia – a rewarding subject which, musically speaking, offers a host of possibilities. Robert Schumann once dived into the Rhine in a fit of melancholy, and Hugo Wolff suffered from fits of insanity. In opera the madness scene even became a separate genre. All these aspects form the point of departure for a festival in which the more rigid PBA and the more adventurous Beursschouwburg will try to keep each other in balance.

WWW.KLARAFESTIVAL.BE
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

- 6 September: *Anima Eterna* conducted by Jos Van Immerseel with 1st Symphony and 1st Piano Concerto by Johannes Brahms, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- 7 to 22 September: *Klara Festival*, Brussels with Bayerisches Staatsorchester, Anima Eterna, Hermes Ensemble, Orchestre des Champs-Elysées, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Flemish Radio Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic and Britten Sinfonia, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.klarafestival.be www.bozar.be
- 7 September: *Anima Eterna* conducted by Jos Van Immerseel with 1st Symphony and 1st Piano Concerto by Johannes Brahms, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- 8 September: *Vassina-Verbruggen-Gudmundson Trio* (Iceland), Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- 10 September: *Praktor + Electric Gipsyland*, Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- 10 September: *Alpenueft 1: Eavesdropper* & *Christian Fennesz*, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be
- 10 September: *Pierre-Laurant Aimard* (piano) with Preludes by Debussy, Skrjabin and Messiaen, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be 03/248.28.28
- 12, 15 and 17 September: *India: many faces*, Zuiderpershuis, Antwerp; info: www.zuiderpershuis.be
- 14 September: *The Dutch Academy with Grossi and Correlli*, Bijloke, Ghent; info: www.bijloke.be
- 15 September: *Dave Douglas & Friends*, De Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be
- 16 to 19 September: *South India Festival* with Yakshghana, Parur violin Trio, Karunkaran and Akran Khan & Shiva, Bozar, Brussels; info: www.bozar.be
- 19 September: *Bruce Hornsby solo*, De Handelsbeurs, Ghent; info: www.handelsbeurs.be

EXPO

- Until 12 September: *Animals in Architecture*, Museum of Architecture, Brussels
- Until 5 September: *Speaking Sculptures*, the Songye, Museum of Africa, Tervuren; info: www.afrikamuseum.be
- Until 3 October: *Marcel Breuer, Design & Architecture*, exhibition CIVA, Brussels; info: www.civa.be
- Until 5 September: *Sam Durant, 12 Signs*, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be
- Until 26 September: *Olympic Games for animals*, Museum of natural sciences, Brussels; info: 02/627.42.38 www.natuurwetenschappen.be
- Until 19 September: *Sam Durant, 12 Signs*, SMAK, Ghent; info: 09/221.17.03 www.smak.be
- Until 26 September: *Alpenduetz 1: Eavesdropper* & *Christian Fennesz*, Concertgebouw, Bruges; info: www.concertgebouw.be

Focusing on Flanders provides a weekly overview of articles from the Flemish press and appears in English, French and German. This newsletter is published by Uitgeverij Lannoo nv, Kasteelstraat 97, 8700 Tielt and can also be obtained by e-mail.