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“Comme les sauterelles sur un champ de maïs mûr”: the Belgian unions and alien labour in hotels and restaurants in the 1930s*

Abstract

This paper examines how the traditional seasonal labour of foreign hospitality workers in Belgian cosmopolitan tourist resorts became an issue in the course of the 1930s. As a result of the lobbying by trade unions a protectionist immigration policy was implemented in Belgium from 1931 onwards. An exception to the ban on immigration of foreign labour was constituted by the few hundred highly skilled Italian and French hospitality workers who arrived each season in the tourist resorts, since the employers claimed that the national workforce lacked the qualifications required for service in high-class hotels. The socialist and Christian unions of hospitality workers fiercely denounced the hiring of foreign staff in years of high unemployment. Stirred by the emotional appeals of nationalist organisations, who jealously wished to safeguard Belgium for the Belgians, the socialist and Christian unions reproduced this nationalist and highly xenophobic discourse. The unions' limited power in a sector that was difficult to organise provides an explanation for the little resistance they offered to the nationalist rhetoric. However, throughout the 1930s, the Belgian authorities continued to make an exception to blocked immigration for such seasonal labour migrants.

Keywords

*Italian workers
1930s
Belgium
xenophobia
trade unions
protectionism
hospitality industry
elite tourism*

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Internationalisation of the workforce in the restaurant and hotel business had been taking place since the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. French, German, Swiss, Austrian and Italian hospitality workers were employed in fashionable venues on both sides of the Atlantic. The increasing number of elite and middle-class tourists, and the spreading in time and space of seasonal tourist activities, engendered the migration of hospitality workers who catered to this public.¹ On the eve of the First World War, organisations of German, French, English and Belgian hospitality workers expressed anxiety with regard to this international labour migration.² They conceded that the hospitality trade was an international trade *par excellence*, but they also accused international migration of being a cause for deteriorating work conditions. While the First World War was followed by a massive wave of anti-German feeling,³ the economic depression further fuelled an ambition to reserve the “national” hospitality labour market for national workers. The Belgian case discussed in this contribution illustrates how, in the competition for ever scarcer resources, the foreign hospitality worker was constructed as the alien Other, to be despised, envied and feared.

A seasonal workforce for the *Palaces*, a permanent workforce in the large cities

From the nineteenth century onwards, the exclusive hotels at the Belgian seaside and in the Ardennes (Spa) were the places where cosmopolitan high society spent its summer holidays. The personnel in contact with this clientele not only had to speak the three main European languages (German, French and English) fluently, but also had to be able to cater to the exclusive tastes of these customers. A maximum of comfort was provided in these *Palaces* and the service too was at the highest level. The highly qualified manpower of these *Palaces* came mainly from Germany, France and Italy. During the Belle Époque in the Ostend *Palaces* such as *Splendid Hôtel*, *Hôtel du Kursaal* and *Beau Site*, less than 50% of the personnel were of Belgian nationality. The French predominated in the kitchen, the Germans were responsible for the administration, and Germans and Italians mostly took care of the service in the restaurant. Local labour was used mainly for menial tasks where contact with the clientele was minimal: chambermaids, coachmen, dishwashers, etc.



¹ John TOWNER, *An Historical Geography of Recreation and Tourism in the Western World 1540-1940* (New York, 1996), pp. 246-255; John K. WALTON, “‘The Tourism Labour Conundrum’ Extended: Historical Perspectives on Hospitality Workers”, *Hospitality & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2012), pp. 64-66.

² See the introduction and contribution of Van den Eeckhout in this *Dossier*.

³ See the contributions in this *Dossier* of Panayi and Manz, Tessier and Jourdain.

The *directeurs d'hôtel*, the *chefs de cuisine*, the *maîtres d'hôtel* and the *chefs de rang* were mostly of foreign nationality and moved along with the wealthy. By the end of the summer, they left the Belgian seaside for other exclusive meeting places of the international haute bourgeoisie of the Belle Epoque (San Remo, Menton, Nice, Monte Carlo...)⁴

In the interwar period these first-class hotels, the so-called *Palaces*, had partly kept their elitist character. They still served a largely foreign and very wealthy clientele and were open only during the summer, for about 110 days a year. By then Germans were no longer welcome.⁵ However, Italian and French personnel trained in the hotel schools of their countries remained essential for the proper functioning of these hotels. Each summer these workers left the exclusive establishments in Italy, Switzerland or the French coast to head for the Belgian hotels, just as they had done in the pre-war period.⁶

The boom in Belgian elite tourism in the 1920s meant that this employment pattern served its purposes well. Since attempts to make the Belgian seaside a winter season resort failed, there was no need for personnel all year round. The managers of the *Palaces* did not consider changes in their personnel policy necessary. In the post-war wave of Belgian patriotism and anti-German feeling (“the Teutonic invasion” in hospitality was a popular theme both in Belgium and France), the idea of a Belgian hotel school to allow the replacement of foreign personnel by Belgians was considered both by employers and the government. However, in 1922 this initiative was abandoned due to a lack of finance.⁷ Moreover, some argued that the setting up of a hotel school to train Belgian personnel was superfluous as the *Palaces* could provide these workers with only seasonal employment.⁸

The exclusive hotels in Antwerp and Brussels also hired immigrants for employment all year round. Tourism was still an activity of the international

⁴ Ronny GOBYN, “Kuuroorden en badplaatsen in België, 16de-20ste eeuw” in *Te Kust en te Kuur. Badplaatsen en kuuroorden in België, 16de-20ste eeuw* (Brussels, 1987), pp. 9-67; Germain BILLIET, “Over de exploitatie van het Splendid Hotel (1908-1914)”, *De Plate*, vol. 16, no. 5-8 (1987), pp. 136-147; Marc CONSTANDT, “De hotels aan de Belgische kust” in *Te Kust en te Kuur...*, pp. 111-129; Register of Staff, Hôtel de Littoral-Continental Osborne- Westend Palace. Private Collection Marc Constandt; Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), individual files of hotel personnel, 762.181, 762.370-379, 762.392-397.

⁵ Frank CAESTECKER, Antoon VRINTS, “National Mobilization of German immigrants and their descendants in Belgium (1870-1920)” in Panikos PANAYI (ed.), *Germans as Minorities During the First World War: A Global Comparative Perspective* (London, 2014), pp. 123-146.

⁶ Foreigners’ register, 1923-1940. Municipal archive Middelkerke, Westend, WL183; Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 665-667 (33C34/1); Ralph SCHOR (ed.), *Nice cosmopolite 1860-2010* (Paris, 2010), pp. 63-81.

⁷ See the PhD of Virginie JOURDAIN, *L’hôtellerie bruxelloise 1880-1940. Acteurs, structures et logiques spatiales d’un secteur multiforme*, vol. 1 (Brussels, 2011), pp. 187-191.

⁸ *Arbeidsblad*, vol. 31, no. 7 (1930), p. 1060; *La Belgique hôtelière*, vol. 47, no. 22 (1935), p. 720.

elites, bringing along their “culinary norms, codes and expectations”.⁹ The industry required people who spoke several languages, as well as cooks who could prepare recipes from the customers’ country of origin. The employment of foreigners may have contributed to the establishment’s exoticism or status.¹⁰ Another factor that might have influenced the hiring of foreign workers – as pointed out by Panayi – is that in the hospitality trade nationalities tended to congregate. According to him, managers or *mâtres d’hôtel* were more inclined to recruit staff from their country of origin.¹¹

In 1930 tourism was in crisis all over Europe. With the downward trend in the economy the clientele of the grand hotels stayed away. Their personnel, traditionally a highly mobile group, looked for other opportunities. Some qualified hotel personnel was attracted to Antwerp and Brussels from abroad, as they hoped that the festivities to commemorate Belgium’s independence (1830) would attract a lot of tourists. The Belgian unions complained about an “invasion”, which threatened the livelihood of their members and undermined wage levels. The commemoration of Belgian independence in fact did little to improve the lot of the hospitality workers. The qualified Belgian hotel personnel hoped that they would be able to supplement their falling incomes with jobs at the seaside. However, not only was seaside tourism also slackening off, but the opportunities for Belgians were also very limited because of the arrival of seasonal workers from Italy and France in the first-class hotels at the seaside. Although Italians and Frenchmen had long constituted the highly refined manpower of these first-class hotels, they became the focus of the complaints about the invasion of foreign labour.¹²

Foreign workers and labour relations in the Belgian hospitality trade

In contrast with the pre-war period, anxieties of the hospitality workers’ organisations with regard to international migration were not only voiced during conferences and in union periodicals, but the subject became a matter of debate in a newly created forum: the “Joint Committee”. Starting with steelmaking in 1919, the post-war period witnessed the creation of Joint

⁹ Peter SCHOLLIERS, “Brusselse restaurants in de 19^{de} en 20^{ste} eeuw. Over koks, eters, schrijvers en luxe” in Marc JACOBS, Peter SCHOLLIERS (eds), *Buitenhuis eten in de Lage Landen sinds 1800* (Brussels, 2002), p. 154.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Panikos PANAYI, *Spicing up Britain* (London, 2008), p. 83.

¹² *L’Alimentation*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1930), p. 3 and no. 7-8 (1930), p. 2; and vol. 18, no. 10 (1931), p. 4; *Arbeidsblad*, vol. 31, no. 7 (1930), p. 1060; Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 665-667 (33C34/1).

Committees where representatives of employers' and workers' organisations and the government discussed wages and work conditions. Not only a host of industrial sectors, but also the hospitality trade had a Joint Committee. The *Comité national de l'industrie des hôtels, restaurants et débits de boissons* was established by Ministerial decree on 9 February 1922.¹³ Delegates of the *Fédération nationale de l'industrie hôtelière*, the *Union syndicale des hôteliers, restaurateurs et limonadiers de Bruxelles* and the *Confédération nationale des cafetiers de Belgique* represented the employers. Representatives of regional employers' organisations (of the Belgian coast, the Ardennes, Ghent, Antwerp, Liège) joined the committee in the course of the interwar period. As far as workers' organisations were concerned, there were delegates of the socialist *Union syndicale des cuisiniers de Belgique* and the *Centrale du personnel de l'industrie hôtelière de Belgique*, which as part of a merger within the socialist trade union joined the socialist umbrella organisation for the food and hotel industry, the *Centrale des travailleurs de l'alimentation et de l'hôtellerie*, in respectively 1926 and 1930.¹⁴ The Christian union of hospitality workers was established as late as 1931, while its journal was only launched in 1933.¹⁵ This explains the absence of the Christian hospitality union in the early years of the debate on foreign labour. From 1932 onwards, the chairman of the Christian hospitality union became a member of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade and the union's journal would address the issue of foreign labour frequently.¹⁶ For a while an organisation of hospitality workers on the Belgian coast, the *Fédération des employés de l'industrie hôtelière du littoral*, was also a member of the Joint Committee. While the unions of hospitality workers had their say in the Joint Committee, in fact not many cooks or waiters were union members. In Brussels in 1933 the socialist hotel union had 902 members; the Antwerp and Ghent hotel section had 371 and

¹³ Apparently, not only representatives of unions and employers' organisations but also individual cooks, waiters and restaurateurs could join, but from the Ministerial decree of 22 February 1937 on, individual workers or employers could no longer be part of the committee. In Dutch the Joint Committee was called *Nationaal komitee voor hotel-, restauratie- en dranklijsterijbedrijven*. The minutes of the meetings of the Joint Committee are kept at the Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue, more specifically at the Direction du secrétariat des commissions paritaires.

¹⁴ *De Belgische vakbeweging*, no. 6 (1926), p. 79; *De Voeding*, vol. 17, no. 6 (1930), p. 1. The socialist umbrella organisation of the food and hotel industry published periodicals in Dutch and French: *De Voeding* and *L'Alimentation*.

¹⁵ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1938), p. 10.

¹⁶ The bilingual periodical was called *Vakorgaan der Centrale van hotel- spijs-, drankhuispersoneel / Organe professionnel de la Centrale du personnel d'hôtels, restaurants et cafés*. In March 1934 it became: *HO.RES.C.A.P. (Vakorgaan der Christelijke Centrale van hotelpersoneel- Organe professionnel de la Centrale Chrétienne du personnel de l'industrie hôtelière)*.

171 members respectively.¹⁷ In the same year its Christian counterpart had 315 members in Brussels and 261 in Antwerp.¹⁸

In the 1920s, the issue of foreign workers was mentioned only once in the Committee's discussions: in 1922 the representative of the socialist hotel workers' union pointed to the alleged link between the massive unemployment among Belgian hotel workers and the presence of Frenchmen and Italians.¹⁹ Although the socialist hospitality union did not mention the subject again in the meetings of the Joint Committee before 1930, the Belgian socialist unions' umbrella organisation organised an extraordinary conference on "the problem of immigration" in January 1926. The conclusion of this conference would become the Belgian socialist hospitality union's mantra for the years to come: "les travailleurs exotiques" should be hired as "une main-d'œuvre d'appoint", only as a complementary workforce.²⁰ A few years later the question of foreign labour would also figure on the agenda of the conference of the international association of socialist hospitality unions.²¹ However, the statement in the French representative's report that foreign labour was and should remain complementary to the national work force did not figure among the final resolutions. On the other hand, the conference condemned the fact that foreign supervisory personnel often favoured compatriots when vacancies had to be filled.

The depression and the pressure for a restrictive immigration policy

While foreign hospitality workers then had hardly attracted public attention in the 1920s, this changed from 1930 onwards. The fight against foreign labour became a common theme of political struggles. During these years of high unemployment, local labour had to fend for itself and the unions used the rhetoric of national solidarity to advocate the protection of local labour to the detriment of their colleagues of foreign origin. Belgian workers, but also shopkeepers, market vendors, peddlers, musicians and lawyers claimed privileged treatment and tried to restrict access to their profession.²² How

¹⁷ "L'Union. Page réservée au personnel de l'industrie hôtelière", *L'Alimentation*, vol. 20, no. 3-4 (1933), p. 4.

¹⁸ *Arbeidsblad*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1938), p. 239.

¹⁹ Meetings of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade of 2 and 9 March 1922.

²⁰ *Le Mouvement syndical belge*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1926), pp. 49-51.

²¹ *6. Internationale Konferenz der Internationalen Union der Hotel-, Restaurant-, und Cafe-Angestellten. Paris, 19. Bis 21. Mai 1931* (Berlin, 1931), pp. 94-98 [International Institute of Social History (IISH), INT 2718-35].

²² Frank CAESTECKER, *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840-1940. The Creation of Guest workers, Refugees and Illegal Aliens* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 111-257.

this struggle was articulated depended to a large extent on the specificity of the trade. In the hospitality trade the xenophobic discourse was exceptionally virulent. In particular the high-status workers from abroad in the first-class hotels at the seaside became a symbol of foreigners snapping up the best jobs and displacing national labour.

Hence, from 1930 onwards, foreign workers in Belgium became subject to an administrative control of their access to and mobility within the labour market in order to prevent competition with national labour. This meant adapting the presence of foreign labour to the fluctuating needs of the economy. It was crucial to the transformation of alien policy that at the end of the 1920s, industry, which had invested in the recruitment of labour abroad, also became a partner interested in controlling foreign labour. These employers discarded the *laissez-faire* notions that the state should stay out of the labour market and accepted state-controlled access to, and in particular mobility within, the labour market. They did not want the labour they had recruited abroad at high cost to desert them for other industries. Similarly, interests proper to the state – concern about public finances – led to the authorities' intervening. The introduction of voluntary unemployment insurance for Belgians (foreigners were largely excluded), an insurance subsidised by the Belgian authorities, meant that replacing a foreign worker by an unemployed Belgian implied a saving for the Belgian state. These pressures led to the Belgian authorities' intervening in international migration to align it to "national" interests. Although organised labour had insisted most vehemently on regulating migration in order to assure priority to national labour, the unions' role in the new regulatory mechanism was only informal. It was a bridge too far for the Belgian polity to integrate organised labour institutionally in policy with regard to foreigners. Business' interests still held considerable power in the Belgian polity and they did not want any formalised intrusion by the unions in this domain.²³

While until 1930 policy towards immigrant labour remained the sole competence of the minister of justice, from 1931 onwards all aliens who came to Belgium to engage in wage labour had to obtain the authorisation of the ministries both of justice and of labour.²⁴ An exception was made for French citizens. The immigration of French workers remained unrestricted. The Belgian authorities were conscious that the large number of Belgians working in France had to be protected against potential retaliation.²⁵ The

²³ *L'Alimentation*, vol. 25, no. 5 (1938), pp. 1-2; vol. 25, no. 9 (1938), p. 2; more generally: CAESTECKER, *Alien Policy in Belgium...*, pp. 111-154.

²⁴ *Belgian Gazette* (1931), pp. 184ff.

²⁵ Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 710 and 33C39 (latter old number); Firmin LENTACKER, *La frontière franco-belge: Etude géographique des effets d'une frontière* (Lille, 1974); *De Voeding*, vol. 20, no. 12 (1933), p. 3.

aim of the policy makers was to tolerate other foreign workers for specific vacancies only if no Belgian workers were available to fill them. During the depression very few immigrants obtained authorisation to come to Belgium to work. The authorities went along with the unions' opposition to labour migration.

In the hospitality trade too, the trade unions pressured the authorities to stop the immigration of foreign labour. In February and June 1930 and in January 1931, representatives of the regional organisation of hospitality workers on the Belgian coast put foreign labour on the Joint Committee's agenda.²⁶ They complained that the coastal towns were absolutely flooded with foreign workers, and that hiring Belgian personnel was not even considered. However, their plea to oblige hoteliers in seaside resorts and spa towns to employ at least 50% Belgian workers, so as to compose mixed brigades of Belgians and foreigners, was not well received. Employers claimed workers resented mixed brigades, and the other members of the Committee criticised the proposal for being impractical and inapplicable. Employers' representatives complained of the Belgians' dislike of learning foreign languages, and referring to the predominance of the French among the *chefs de cuisine*, they claimed that the French cooks' knowhow was simply superior: "Il manque au belge une culture primaire. Le français arrive plus vite parce qu'il a une culture plus développée".²⁷ According to the socialist hospitality union, the Belgians' difficulties in finding a job could be explained by the fact that the hiring for high-class hotels was mostly done by foreign *maitres d'hôtel* who selected homogeneous brigades of workers, often from their own country of origin. In the meeting of the Joint Committee of 17 June 1930 it was agreed that seasonal personnel should be granted a residence permit for the season only (at most from 1 May until 30 September). While the socialist union conceded that hotels in seaside resorts needed these migrants, the aim was to prevent this "extra" staff hired for the season from lingering on.²⁸

²⁶ Meetings of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade of 13 February 1930, 17 June 1930 and 20 January 1931.

²⁷ See also the complaint on the inflow of foreign cooks in the periodical of the socialist food workers' union: on 7 February 1930 a group of Brussels cooks organised a meeting more or less directed against the socialist union and which had one subject on its agenda: the struggle against foreign labour: *L'Alimentation*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1930), p. 1. At the conference of the Belgian socialist food workers' unions on 8 June 1930, the Brussels section suggested that their sister organisations abroad should warn their members against the "dangers" of migrating to Belgium. The conference acknowledged the right of foreign workers to work in Belgium, but confirmed the statement of 1926 that it would have to be as a complementary workforce only: *De Voeding*, vol. 17, no. 7 (1930), pp. 2, 5.

²⁸ Meeting of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade of 20 January 1931.

The construction of the Italian waiter

Just as any other labour migrant in 1931, the Italian workers, be they *mâîtres d'hôtel* or *chefs de rang*, needed for the first time an official authorisation to do their habitual summer work. The hotels warned their Italian personnel who were working in the winter in Italy, France and Switzerland that they had to apply for permission to work. When the Italians arrived in Belgium in May and June 1931 for the season, not all had done so. Some of them were considered illegal immigrants. The local police ordered them to leave the country. The managers of the *Palaces* protested: they could not do without these Italians. In the end the authorities tolerated all the foreigners working in these hotels for that season, but warned that for the season of 1932 all Italian migrants had to apply before their arrival for an authorisation to work.²⁹

In the spring of 1932, the Belgian authorities expressed their doubts whether authorisations for foreign hospitality workers should be granted, given massive Belgian unemployment. The advice of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade was sought. The representatives of the unions argued that in times of crisis no authorisations could be tolerated, except for the French who admitted a reciprocal 10% share of Belgians. Given the lack of Belgian hospitality workers who spoke four languages and could offer the international clientele a superior service, these authorisations were indispensable, claimed the employers' representatives. Before the war, Germans provided this service, in the interwar period Italian and Swiss hospitality workers were to be hired with a view to further attracting an international clientele. In Belgium this type of hotel worker was simply not available, employers' representatives argued: "on trouvera plus facilement en Belgique des taverniers et des ouvriers de 2e catégorie que des ouvriers qualifiés de premier ordre".

In March 1932 the Joint Committee decided that a subcommittee for matters of foreign labour would advise on individual authorisations.³⁰ From 1932 onwards, the spontaneous arrival of foreign workers was thus halted, and each year the employers of the *Palaces* had to obtain the agreement of the authorities for each foreign worker they wished to recruit abroad, except for

²⁹ Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33C34/1 (old number).

³⁰ Meeting of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade of 8 March 1932. As a result the subject of foreign labour largely disappeared from the Joint Committee's discussions, but we were not able to trace the minutes of the meetings of this subcommittee. From the minutes of the meeting of the Joint Committee of 14 February 1935, we learn that the subcommittee on foreign labour was no longer active, but that it would be reactivated. Apparently that was the case, for the periodical of the Christian hospitality union mentions meetings on 7 and 14 March 1935 and on 5 March 1936: *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1935), pp. 22-23; March (1936), p. 5.

Frenchmen.³¹ In 1933 and 1934 respectively 215 and 213 aliens received a work permit for the season, the majority of them Italians.³² The Ministry of Justice considered their skills essential for the hotels, notwithstanding opposition from the unions.

On several occasions the Christian hospitality union questioned the expertise of the highly qualified foreigners who were called every summer to the first-class coastal hotels. Their “popularity”, so the Christian union argued, could only be explained by the Belgian lack of chauvinism and the foreigners’ acceptance of low wages.³³ A contributor to the journal of the Christian union, Henri Desfagnes, even suspected the Italians of bringing less recommendable characteristics into play:

Ces messieurs travaillent en smoking pincé à la dernière mode! Escarpins vernis ; chemises de soie, col “up-to-date”.

De plus, leur belle chevelure de négrosine savamment lustrée au “dollar fix”, le gracieux chatoisement de leur geste, l’onctuosité de leurs manières, et le doux zézaïement de leur accent leur assure un indéniabie succès don-juanisque auprès des belles de nuit.

Garçons ou danseurs? Les deux! Parfois plus...³⁴

Not their professional capacities, but the sexual favours they bestowed on the clientele of these coastal *Palaces* were the key to the employers’ asking these Italians back every year. The Belgian workers who were looking for an honest livelihood could not compete with these Italians. In the same article Henri Desfagnes resorted to a classical figure of speech evoking the invasion of glutinous locusts. These Italian workers occupied the best jobs and once the season was over they left Belgium with their pockets full of money:

³¹ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1935), p. 22; *La Belgique hôtelière*, vol. 47, no. 22 (1935), p. 720; *Arbeidsblad*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1932), p. 254. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 665-667.

³² More foreign workers were employed at such hotels, but these had already acquired a right of abode in Belgium. It seems that the exception for the French was lifted in 1936, from then onwards they also had to apply for a work permit. It is possible, even likely, that before 1931 when there was no administrative control over the foreign workforce, that more foreign workers came to Belgium to offer their services to these hotels in the summer.

³³ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, August (1934), pp. 14-15.

³⁴ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, May (1934), p. 22. This was quasi-literally reprinted in the article of Jacques de Roos in *Centrale des Fédérations des ouvriers de l'industrie hôtelière de Belgique*, 8.1935, with a more explicit “patte d'éléphant (pas de chemise dessous)...vous êtes les chéris des vieilles clientes”.

Cette nuée périodique d'employés migrants qui viennent s'abattre aux beaux jours sur les bons emplois comme les sauteuses sur un champ de maïs mûr et qui s'en vont, la poche garnie avec les derniers rayons d'un soleil pâlisant.³⁵

The major argument against foreign hospitality workers was the alleged link between their presence and local unemployment. While the socialist union had occasionally addressed this theme in the 1920s, the Christian hospitality union, a newcomer on the union front since 1931, developed it with much more force in the course of the 1930s. In general, the discourse of the socialist union involved a repetition of the statement of 1926: foreign labour was complementary to the national workforce; only if Belgians could not fill the positions, could foreign hospitality workers be hired. In the spring of 1933, the Christian hospitality union voted a resolution connecting the worsening of unemployment and the presence of foreign workers, and pleaded against the hiring of the latter. High unemployment was not only blamed on the foreigners, it was also due to Belgians from other sectors doing casual waiting.³⁶ The union begged for protection against all "parasites". This virulent attack did not pass unnoticed in socialist quarters: the latter denounced the foolishness of their competitors, arguing that the exclusion of alien workers would only fuel retaliation, while it would force foreign workers into a position in which they would be readier to accept substandard work conditions.³⁷ This attack on the Christian rivals was published in the socialist union periodical's regional pages, as were hostile remarks regarding foreign labour, such as the outcry in the summer of 1934 that "parasites" worsened the situation of Belgian hospitality workers.³⁸ The Antwerp section of the socialist union was responsible for this xenophobic prose, which was often combined with harsh critiques of their rather successful local Christian counterpart. It seems that the Antwerp section of the socialist hospitality union was trying to outbid its Christian opponents.

According to the Christian hospitality union, foreign hospitality workers' predominance in Belgium's finest hotels would eventually undermine the knowhow of the Belgians: a Belgian worker in such a job would become a rarity.³⁹ Now and then attempts were made to figure out what exactly the proportion of foreigners was in this line of work.⁴⁰ The Christian union's

³⁵ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, May (1934), p. 22.

³⁶ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, April (1933), pp. 22-23; September (1933), pp. 19-20; July (1934), pp. 4-7.

³⁷ *De Voeding*, vol. 20, no. 12 (1933), p. 3.

³⁸ *De Voeding*, vol. 20, no. 6 (1933), p. 4; vol. 21, no. 3 (1934), p. 2; vol. 21, no. 7 (1934), p. 4; vol. 21, no. 8 (1934), p. 4; vol. 21, no. 9-10 (1934), pp. 3-4; vol. 22, no. 7 (1935), p. 3; vol. 22, no. 8 (1935), p. 4; vol. 22, no. 9 (1935), p. 4. Occasionally the complaint on the presence of foreign hospitality workers did not concern Antwerp, but the city of Ghent: *De Voeding*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1937), p. 4.

³⁹ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, October (1934), pp. 9-11; November (1935), pp. 3-5.

⁴⁰ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, July (1934), pp. 4-7; September (1934), pp. 13-14; March (1935), pp. 19-20; November (1935), p. 3.

journal claimed that more than 75% of hospitality workers on the Belgian coast were foreign,⁴¹ and in the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade a *chef de cuisine* from Ostend asserted that this was the case for 70%. In the same meeting of that Committee the representative of the socialist union argued that the city of Ostend had informed him that 13% were foreign, but representatives of hoteliers mentioned 50% and 80% foreign workers for hotels only open during the season.⁴² In the summer, foreigners were undoubtedly well represented among the most qualified and best-paid hospitality workers, but even outside the tourist season foreigners were part of the top segments of hotel personnel.⁴³ The journal of the Christian hospitality union asserted that most houses hired foreigners as *maître d'hôtel* or *chef de cuisine*.⁴⁴ However, apart from the anecdotal “evidence” produced by the unions, there are no indications that their virulent attacks were based on an actual increase of immigrants during the depression, or on them accepting substandard working conditions.⁴⁵ Foreign workers had long been strongly represented in this sector, but during the economic downturn with high unemployment, they became an easy target for the disgruntled Belgian hotel workers.

Besides the weakness of the unions in the hotel and restaurant business and their mutual outbidding, the competition with organisations of Belgian hotel personnel independent of the unions can explain this radical tone. One of these was the *Association nationale des employés de l'industrie hôtelière*, an organisation created in 1934 by self-defined “elite hotel personnel” in order to fight for priority of Belgian personnel. Others were the *Centrale des Fédérations des ouvriers de l'industrie hôtelière* and *La Prévoyante, Union professionnelle belge des maîtres d'hôtel, garçons, restaurateurs, limonadiers et personnel des deux sexes appartenant à l'industrie hôtelière*.

All of these organisations directed their campaigns mainly, if not exclusively, against the aliens who were allegedly taking the best jobs in the hotel sector. They pointed to France where a national priority had been introduced which led to the expulsion of Belgians. The hotel sector was one of

⁴¹ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, September (1934), p. 14.

⁴² Meeting of the Joint Committee for the hospitality trade of 20 January 1931.

⁴³ For example the Italian *maître d'hôtel* of *Westend Hotel Cipolli* from Aix-les-Bains was considered a very good worker and he earned each month during the summer 800 BEF, but he also received 53% of the tips and 2% of the sale of drinks. The *commis*, Belgian and foreign alike, earned 100 or 200 BEF per month and their tips (500 BEF du tronc). Overview of staff at *Westend Hotel* during the summer of 1934. S.A. Westende Foncière et Industrie to De Moulière Hôtel Continental Osborne De Panne, 31.1.1935. Private Collection Marc Constandt.

⁴⁴ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, July (1934), p. 5.

⁴⁵ Due to complaints about “abuses” in the hotel sector in March 1935, the alien police looked into the personnel of some of these hotels. Of 127 foreigners working in five first-class hotels in Brussels and Antwerp 90% (114) had been settled in Belgium since at least the spring of 1932. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33 C 30 7 (old number).

the few sectors where the French law on the protection of national labour (1932) was implemented: at most 10 and 20% – depending on the professional category – of the personnel could be of foreign nationality.⁴⁶ As a result, the French government wanted Belgian workers to leave France, like any other foreign worker who had a job that an unemployed Frenchman wanted to do. Only those who had been living in France for at least ten years were to be exempt.⁴⁷ The harsh treatment at the hands of the French state was strongly resented by the authorities and Belgian public opinion.⁴⁸ The journal of *La Prévoyante* wanted the Belgian government to take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.⁴⁹ They considered it a national shame that hotels employed only aliens for the top functions while Belgian workers were qualified enough to replace them.⁵⁰ These small single-issue professional groups attacked in a demeaning manner the foreign workforce as “des imposteurs étrangers qui visent à déprécier la valeur morale et professionnelle des Belges [...]”.⁵¹ Belgium was called the junkyard of Europe, attracting the outcasts of the neighbouring countries.⁵² In a metaphor similar to the one the Christian union used, the foreign workers were compared to gluttonous locusts. Jacques de Roos, president of the *Union professionnelle belge des garçons, restaurateurs...la Prévoyante* stated:

Du pain pour nos nationaux. La Belgique est le lieu de rassemblement de tous les indésirables chassés des autres pays. Les étrangers peuvent être comparés à une nuée de sauterelles qui s'abat dans un champ de blé [...] nos nationaux deviennent des éléments de deuxième zone dans notre propre pays.⁵³

⁴⁶ Ralph SCHOR, *L'opinion française et les étrangers en France, 1919-1939* (Paris, 1985), pp. 589-596; Ralph SCHOR, “Les employés d'hôtel français et les travailleurs étrangers sur la Côte d'Azur, 1919-1935”, *Religion et société*, vol. 9 (1981), pp. 7-9.

⁴⁷ Firmin LENTACKER, *La frontière franco-belge...*, p. 279f.; Frank CAESTECKER, *Alien Policy ...*, p. 188f.

⁴⁸ *Annales Parlementaires, Chambre*, 15.4.1935, pp. 1025-1036.

⁴⁹ *La Tribune hôtelière*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1934), p. 1.

⁵⁰ Report of the Gendarmerie, 30.6.1934. Légion Nationale, 6.7.1935. Centrale des Fédérations des Ouvriers de l'Industrie Hôtelière de Belgique, 8.1935. Bulletin officiel de l'Association nationale des employés de l'industrie hôtelière, 1934. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33 C 307 (old number).

⁵¹ Compte rendu de la séance inaugurale de l'EMHOREC, association nationale des employés de l'industrie hôtelière, 7.12.1934. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33 C 307 (old number).

⁵² *La Tribune hôtelière*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1934), p. 2.

⁵³ Concluding remarks at a meeting in Brussels on unemployment and the struggle against the foreign workforce, a meeting in Brussels attended by 140 and on which the police reported. Report of the Gendarmerie, 30.6.1934. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33 C 307 (old number).

In a variation on the Christian union's characterisation of Italian waiters, the journal of *La Prévoyante* suggested these foreigners were pimps: "Garçon ou danseur? Les deux parfois! Et bien souvent, souteneur".⁵⁴

The socialist and Christian unions in other economic sectors also launched campaigns to obtain protection for national labour, but their tone was much milder. They pressured the authorities (and the employers) within the corporatist agencies, which had come into being during the 1920s, to give preference to national labour. In a rather business-like manner the interests of the Belgian workforce were defended and there was little need for an emotional appeal to nationalist feelings. This restraint had also a strategic reason: in those sectors, such as heavy industry, where foreign labour was a structural part of the labour force and where foreign workers were needed even during an economic downturn, such a nationalist campaign would alienate all foreign labourers from the union, and that would weaken its strength.⁵⁵

In the hotel sector both unions did take the issue more to the streets as they felt forced by other organisations of hotel personnel to make clear to their members and the unorganised hotel workers that in the competition between foreign and national workers, the unions were on the side of the latter.⁵⁶ The seasonal immigration of qualified hotel workers, of Italian (and French) nationality, was like a red rag to a bull in this protectionist campaign. Initially the reaction of the authorities to these complaints about the abusive employment of foreign labour was limited. Only those foreign workers who had arrived in Belgium recently were occasionally ordered to leave the country. If the foreigners had been in Belgium for a few years, they had acquired a right of abode and no further action was taken.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *La Tribune hôtelière*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1934), p. 2.

⁵⁵ Frank CAESTECKER, "Vakbonden en etnische minderheden, een ambigue verhouding. Immigratie in de Belgische mijnbekkens, 1900-1940", *Brood & Rozen*, vol. 2, no.1 (1997), pp. 51-63; Frank CAESTECKER, *Alien policy ...*, pp. 111-196.

⁵⁶ The socialist hotel union referred explicitly to these small organisations and "beaux parleurs nationalistes". *L'Alimentation*, vol. 20, no. 9 (1933) and vol. 22, no. 6 (1935), p. 1. The hotel unions went to great pains to explain to the hotel workers of foreign nationality who had settled in Belgium, that the union was not attacking them as they were considered full-fledged members of the Belgian workforce and that protection against immigrants was also in their interest. *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1934), p. 22; *L'Alimentation*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1936), p. 3; vol. 25, no. 9 (1938), p. 5.

⁵⁷ It seems that the alien police became more restrictive during the 1930s. In the first half of 1932 the alien police did not order recently arrived aliens who had a job to leave the country. Given that they had a job they were not considered unwanted. Later on, even recent immigrants who had a job were told to leave the country. In other sectors where complaints were lodged by indigenous workers or labour organisations the alien police proceeded in a similar manner. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33 C 307 (old number).

Symbolic and other measures restricting the inflow of foreign hospitality workers

The Royal Decree of 8 December 1934, which was similar to the French law of 1932, allowed the Christian-democrat minister of labour, E. Rubbens, to promulgate quotas for foreign workers. He could thus put a cap on the employment of foreign labour in certain regions or industries. This strongly increased the authorities' power to intervene in the labour market and the labour unions, socialist and Christian alike, were supportive of the quota law.⁵⁸ However it quickly turned out that this quota law was aimed more at encouraging the employers to replace their foreign labour with Belgian unemployed labour than at making this compulsory. Now that the minister of labour had been given the power to restrict the use of foreign labour, the umbrella organisation of the Christian unions became much more moderate in its demands to replace foreign labour. It insisted that the implementation of the quota law be well prepared. Humanitarian, diplomatic and also economic considerations meant that only a partial and gradual removal of foreign labour was feasible. The union argued that a flexible approach was necessary, but the replacement of immigrants with unemployed Belgian workers was still the final aim, and with the new powers their ministry of labour had at its disposal, this would also be easier to achieve.⁵⁹

The Christian hospitality union, but also the socialist union in this sector, were not impressed by these calls for moderation by their umbrella organisations. In the beginning of 1935, they called for the immediate expulsion of all foreign workers in their industry who had been in Belgium for less than five years. Consequently, all the foreigners who had immigrated after May 1929 should be fired and sent back "home".⁶⁰ Where the Christian hospitality union is concerned, the latter was in fact a moderation of their former position, since no later than in October 1934, it demanded that Belgium be

⁵⁸ *De Tijd*, 4.7.1935; *Het Volk*, 12.12.1934/3-6; *Ons Limburg*, 22.12.1934/1, 3-4 and 15.12.1934/1; *De Voeding*, vol. 22, no.1 (1935), p. 4.

⁵⁹ *De Vrije Mijnwerker*, vol. 16, no. 5 (1935), p. 14; *Het Volk*, 11.12.1934/4, 7. The Christian union's leadership insisted that the implementation of the quota law had to take into account the labour treaties Belgium had signed with other countries and had to exempt Russian "refugees" and immigrants who had long lived in Belgium and were married to Belgian women. KADOC, ACV-Raad, 11.12.1934. ACV-Bestuur, 7.12.1934.

⁶⁰ Although the demands of the socialist hospitality union were not merely of local importance, the issue of the "removal" of hospitality workers who had worked less than five years in Belgium, was mentioned on the journal's regional pages, more precisely the part devoted to the Antwerp section. Again the text is intertwined with criticism of the local Christian rival: *De Voeding*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1935), p. 4; vol. 22, no. 4 (1935), p. 4; *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, January (1935), p. 9; February (1935), pp. 12-13.

cleansed of all foreigners.⁶¹ In March 1935, the chairman of the Christian hospitality union conceded that a radical elimination of foreigners was reprehensible and he pleaded for a slow and gradual reduction, but the ban on new foreign workers was maintained.⁶²

The Christian democratic minister of labour, E. Rubbens, made no use of the quota law. As the hotel sector was a sector where the campaign against the immigrants had been fiercest, he did investigate whether to implement a quota there. It was quickly considered that imposing a quota on the hotel industry was not worth the trouble. The number of foreign workers was limited and the inflexible nature of such an intervention would disrupt the trade. In August 1935 the successor of Rubbens, the socialist minister of labour A. Delattre, tried out an experiment with a quota in the mining industry. It turned out to be a failure.⁶³

In 1935, Belgian hoteliers again requested highly qualified, multilingual personnel “with style” to cater to the needs of their largely foreign clientele. They claimed that there were not enough qualified Belgians available and that it made no sense to train sufficient local personnel, as the need was only seasonal.⁶⁴ The employers’ annual demand for an authorisation to call upon qualified labour in France, Switzerland and Italy for the summer season was partly agreed to. The luxurious hotels at the seaside and in the Ardennes obtained permission to call upon probably about a hundred aliens for the season, but only for the most specialised jobs. The shortage of qualified Belgian personnel, due to the demands that the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1935 would entail, caused the Christian democratic minister of labour E. Rubbens to tolerate this seasonal labour migration.⁶⁵ He did this notwithstanding the radical opposition of both unions to granting work permits to such seasonal workers.⁶⁶ The Belgian authorities’ alleged indecisiveness exasperated the

⁶¹ “Qu’il est grand temps, qu’à l’instar de nos voisins, la Belgique se purge! Qu’elle se purge des étrangers qui condamnent ses propres fils au chômage! Qu’elle se purge des étrangers qui viennent surgrever ses budgets et vivre aux frais de ses contribuables! Qu’elle se purge surtout des parasites, des gens sans aveux, des véritables “out-law” qui compromettent la sécurité publique!”: *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, October (1934), p. 11.

⁶² *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1935), p. 23.

⁶³ *De Voeding*, vol. 22, no. 6 (1935), p. 1; Frank CAESTECKER, *Alien Policy ...*, pp. 190-192.

⁶⁴ “Leur genre d’exploitation les oblige à n’employer que du personnel stylé et ayant une connaissance approfondie du métier. L’étranger constitue 90 p.c. de la clientèle de ces maisons, conséquemment la direction se voit, en outre, contrainte à n’employer que du personnel qui parle les trois grandes langues couramment”, *La Belgique hôtelière*, vol. 47, no. 22 (1935), p. 720.

⁶⁵ *De Voeding*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1935), p. 4 and no. 4, p. 4; *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1935), pp. 19-24 and no. 4, p. 13. The decision to grant this immigration permission was probably one of the last decisions of the Christian democratic minister of labour E. Rubbens. The Joint Committee of the hotel industry met on March 14 to discuss the matter. On March 19 the government abdicated and on March 25 the socialist politician A. Delattre was nominated minister of labour.

⁶⁶ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1935), p. 22; *De Voeding*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1935), p. 4.

Christian hospitality union.⁶⁷ In July 1935, its journal accused the representative of the by then socialist minister of labour of downplaying the presence of foreign hospitality workers and criticised him because he seemed to agree with the Belgian hoteliers that specialised hospitality personnel had indeed to come from abroad.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the employers' organisation of the hotel sector complained that the administration lacked efficiency. Work permits were granted at random. The employers insisted that the authorities should develop a clear-cut policy.⁶⁹

In 1936, the employers once again requested work permits for seasonal workers. Both unions repeated that enough Belgians were willing and able to do the jobs.⁷⁰ The unions, however, dropped their radical position of 1935 – the economy had improved – and expressed their willingness to find a compromise. The meeting of the Joint Committee's subcommittee on foreign labour of 5 March 1936 stipulated that immigrant labour would be tolerated only as specialised (and seasonal) personnel for first-class hotels.⁷¹ This was the formalisation of the state practice since 1931. However, the unions and probably also the new minister of labour, the socialist Achille Delattre were confident that a transparent labour market, as a result of connecting regional labour exchange offices with the central office in Brussels, together with a training of the work force to answer specific needs of the labour market, would render the presence of immigrants minimal if not obsolete. In the eyes of the unions it became a question of national pride. They urged unemployed Belgian hospitality workers to prove they could perform the jobs of chef, *maitre-d'hôtel*, station (head)waiter and head receiver in these hotels. The national honour seemed to be at stake.⁷²

Still in 1936 the minister of labour Achille Delattre granted, just as his Christian democratic predecessor had done, about a hundred authorisations for foreign labour during the season.⁷³ The socialist union deplored the hiring of foreigners at the seaside, while native workers were unemployed.⁷⁴ Although the economy improved in 1936 and unemployment dropped, Delattre decided to look more seriously into the need for highly qualified hotel workers for the next season.⁷⁵ By the end of March 1937, all employers

⁶⁷ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, December (1934) pp. 8-9.

⁶⁸ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, July (1935), p. 6. The indignation voiced in the periodical's report on the meeting of the Joint Committee of 11 July 1935 contrasts with the actual minutes of the meeting: only a few passing remarks were made on the subject of alien workers.

⁶⁹ *La Belgique hôtelière*, vol. 47, no. 22 (1935), p. 720.

⁷⁰ *De Voeding*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1936), p. 4; *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, January (1937), p. 15.

⁷¹ *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1936), p. 5.

⁷² *HO.RES.C.A.P.*, March (1936), p. 5; *De Voeding*, vol. 24, no.6 (1937), p. 4.

⁷³ *La Belgique hôtelière*, vol. 48, no. 10 (1936), p. 324.

⁷⁴ *De Voeding*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1936), p. 4.

⁷⁵ Delattre to President ONPC, 4.9.1936. Archive Office national de l'emploi, comité de direction de l'ONPC 1935-1939.

had to draw up a list of the foreigners they wished to recruit abroad, including which job they would be hired for. The national labour exchange office would then look into the possibility of finding Belgians for these jobs. All Belgians, and also all foreigners, residing legally in Belgium willing to do this seasonal work had to register at the local labour exchange offices. Only after comparing the two lists would a decision be made as to whether seasonal immigration of hotel personnel would be tolerated.⁷⁶ The employers drew up a list of personnel with high qualitative requirements. The labour exchange offices could not meet the demand. Neither were the unions, which had insisted that there was no specific shortage of manpower in the hotel industry, able to come up with enough qualified Belgians. The unions contested the fact that the hotels needed such highly skilled personnel and argued that they only wanted foreigners because they refused to pay their personnel decent wages.⁷⁷ The minister of labour A. Delattre did not heed the advice of the union, and as a result the hotels were again granted their traditional foreign labour for the season of 1937. An additional condition was imposed on the employers: they had to guarantee the repatriation of the workers they recruited abroad.⁷⁸

Targeted by nationalists and the extreme right

At the very end of the 1930s, the unions in the hotel sector again adopted an anti-immigrant attitude. The economy was again in a downturn and unemployment skyrocketed. The flight of impoverished Jews from Nazi Germany added to the difficulties of the labour market. These refugees were dependent on financial support from the local Jewish community, which by 1938 was facing serious financial difficulties in meeting the needs of these refugees. The small allowances they were allocated were insufficient and many worked unofficially in Belgium.⁷⁹ The unions claimed that a large number of unofficial workers were being hired in the hospitality trade under unacceptable conditions. A much stricter control over the employment of immigrants was demanded. The socialist union complained that while in 1936 and 1937 the

⁷⁶ *De Voeding*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1937) and no. 2, p. 4.

⁷⁷ *De Voeding*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1937), p. 4.

⁷⁸ As a result of the change in alien legislation in 1936 the employers probably had to pay a security to cover the cost of travel to the border of the country of origin of each of their seasonal workers coming from abroad. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33C30/9-1 (old number); Frank CAESTECKER, *Alien Policy...*, pp. 204 and 219; *Le Progrès Social. Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association belge pour le Progrès Social* (Liège, 1939), p. 82.

⁷⁹ Frank CAESTECKER, *Ongewenste gasten, joodse vluchtelingen en migranten in de dertiger jaren* (Brussels, 1993), p. 223; Insa MEINEN & Ahlrich MEYER, *Verfolgt von Land zu Land. Jüdische Flüchtlinge in Westeuropa, 1938-1944* (Paderborn, 2013), p. 34.

labour inspection had reported on respectively 21% and 27% of their complaints, this fell to a mere 5% in 1938. This meant that 95% of the union's complaints were not taken seriously enough by the labour inspection to start prosecuting the employers concerned. Employers were increasingly only admonished and in this way disregard of the regulations concerning employment of foreign labour continued to be tolerated.⁸⁰ The unions opposed the employment of any foreigner while there was still unemployment among their members. In 1938, the conference of the socialist union of hotel personnel voted a resolution in which the continuous employment of aliens was said "to impugn the honour of the workers in this country and doom them to unemployment".⁸¹

As early as the first half of the 1930s, some nationalist organisations had been set up around this issue. Their campaign to clamp down on the foreign workers in the hotel industry had continued unabated during the 1930s. The socialist and Christian unions alike had felt these nationalist organisations breathing down their necks. As mentioned before, that was probably the main reason why the unions had been so adamant about replacing foreign workers with Belgian workers in the first half of the 1930s.⁸² In the second half of the 1930s, this xenophobic campaign did not come to a standstill. It acquired a more organised character when the extreme right picked up the theme of foreign hospitality workers invading the industry. The *Corporation de l'industrie hôtelière de Belgique*, a member of the extreme right umbrella organisation *Front corporatif national/ Nationaal Corporatief Front*, which had assembled extreme right splinter groups with a view to the parliamentary elections of 1936, demanded "du travail pour les Belges d'abord".⁸³ The corporation pleaded for the refusal of work permits to immigrants, even for a season, as long as Belgians were unemployed. It was again Jacques de Roos, by then president of the *Corporation de l'industrie hôtelière de Belgique* who organised the opening meeting in Brussels of the *Comité de défense contre l'emploi abusive de la main d'œuvre étrangère dans l'industrie hôtelière*. According to the police, seventy people were at that meeting, which was directed mainly against the invasion of their profession by so-called political refugees from Nazi Germany and Italy. In this xenophobic campaign the main culprits became the Jews.

⁸⁰ These figures refer to all abuses which the union denounced, not only about employment of foreign labour. *L'Alimentation*, vol. 25, no. 5 (1938), pp. 2-3.

⁸¹ *De Belgische vakbeweging*, 20.11.1938, p. 385.

⁸² *De Voeding*, vol. 22, no. 6 (1935), p. 1.

⁸³ Alain COLIGNON, "Le Rexisme, un pré-poujadisme?" in F. BALACE et. al. *De l'avant à l'après-guerre. L'extrême droite en Belgique francophone* (Brussels, 1994), p. 67. The Flemish secretary of the *Front corporatif national*, Louis Duysburgh, was a Member of Parliament in the years 1936-1939 for the extreme-right party *Rex* of Léon Degrelle. See Peter HEYRMAN, *Middenstandsbeweging en beleid in België 1918-1940. Tussen vrijheid en regulering* (Louvain, 1998), p. 588; *Le Soir*, 12 January 1939, p. 2.

Again the presence of aliens was vastly exaggerated. A member of the extreme-right *Corporation de l'industrie hôtelière de Belgique*, claimed 50% of the hospitality workers in Belgium were foreigners.⁸⁴ The xenophobic campaign at the end of the 1930s was directed at the (partly unofficial) employment of foreigners in hotels in the big cities. The visibility of these foreign workers meant that the radical organisation could bring this issue easily to the streets.

This xenophobic campaign also exploited the seasonal migration of foreigners to the first-class hotels at the seaside, although this issue was much less prominent than five years earlier. In 1938 and 1939, years of high unemployment, a few hundred highly qualified hotel workers got permission to come to Belgium to work each year during the summer. The attempts to provide these hotels with enough Belgian qualified personnel remained unsuccessful. From 1938 onwards, the national labour exchange office was much better prepared for their placement. The hotel sector was given a separate job placement service and special attention was paid to highly qualified Belgian hotel personnel. The labour exchange offices took into account the marked differentiation of the occupational positions within this sector. A *directeur d'hôtel* could not be placed in the same way as a dishwasher. Notwithstanding these efforts, the minister of labour had to conclude that the Belgian unemployed were not qualified enough to fill all the vacancies in such hotels.⁸⁵

As they had argued time and again, employers in the hospitality sector legitimised their preference for foreign workers, by pointing to their appearance, training, knowledge of foreign languages, and because allegedly 85% of the customers at seaside resorts were foreigners. Hiring foreign workers was certainly not inspired by financial motives, employers insisted, because they had to refund these workers' travel costs, while they also had to put up with administrative procedures. Wage levels were said to be irrelevant, since these workers lived on customers' tips.⁸⁶ Most important was that these seasonal workers were well trained and had adapted their careers to the seasonal demands for their skills in different European holiday resorts, by being highly mobile and ready to work long hours during the season.⁸⁷

The unions, who pleaded in the Joint Committee of the hospitality industry for a very selective immigration policy, were not up to this public discussion of recruitment policy. They opposed this type of immigration and repeated that Belgians were qualified enough to do the work. They insisted that if the first-class hotels did not consider the Belgians good enough, they only had to train them. Still in contrast to the previous period, the unions

⁸⁴ *L'Industrie hôtelière*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1939), p. 1; *Le Soir*, 12 January 1939, p. 2.

⁸⁵ In 1938, 193 work permits for immigrants were granted. *Le Progrès social. Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association belge pour le progrès social* (Liège, 1939), p. 80.

⁸⁶ *Le Progrès social...*, p. 82.

⁸⁷ *Le Progrès social...*, pp. 81-82 and 89-90.

hardly discussed this issue openly. While it seems that they insisted within the Joint Committee upon giving priority to national labour, the union press hardly pressed this issue.⁸⁸ The nationalist organisations on the other hand, considered the mere idea that Belgians would need additional training unacceptable. That the authorities agreed to the seasonal immigration of so-called highly qualified, mainly Italian workers, was, according to these radical organisations, sheer proof of the corruption of the political class. The extreme-right newspaper *Le Pays Réel* summarised the symbolic value of the annual recruitment of foreigners for the first-class hotels at the seaside with the slogan “Les étrangers occupent des postes de commande dans de nombreux palaces [...] du travail pour les belges”.⁸⁹ The radical organisations attacked not only hotel staff coming from abroad, but any non-Belgian who had a position of authority in the hotel industry. It was considered offensive that Belgians were ordered about by foreigners, at the seaside or elsewhere in Belgium. The extreme-right newspaper also ridiculed the foreigners’ expertise, claiming on the other hand that Belgians had trained them.⁹⁰

This virulent criticism did not fall on deaf ears. The labour organisations, which had downplayed the foreign labour issue during 1938, were not able or willing to oppose this nationalist discourse. The Christian and socialist trade unions together set up a Defence Committee to put pressure on the authorities and the employers for an absolute priority to be given to Belgian hotel personnel. The extreme right was not willing to join this organisation, but the communists did.⁹¹ In their nationalist campaign, the communists targeted the Italian and German fascists who were working in the hotels.⁹² All the organisations (socialist, communist and Christian) involved in the Defence Committee, considered it an insult that the authorities should agree with the employers that Belgian personnel was insufficiently qualified. They argued that qualifications were not an issue here. On the contrary, the foreigners had destroyed the profession by accepting lower pay, long working hours and by doing all the tasks imposed on them. It was argued that the submissiveness of foreign workers rather than professional skills was the main reason employers favoured them.⁹³ These “highly qualified” foreigners even agreed to do the washing-up. It was this flexibility, which made the aliens more in demand.

⁸⁸ *L’Alimentation*, vol. 25, no. 9 (1938), p. 3; *L’Alimentation*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1939), pp. 2-3; *HO.RES.C.A.P* has no articles in 1938 criticising the employment of foreign labour in the hotel industry.

⁸⁹ *Le Pays réel*, 9 and 10.3.1939, p. 1.

⁹⁰ *Le Pays réel*, 9 and 10.3.1939, p. 1.

⁹¹ Rapport de la Sûreté, 11.3.1939. Meeting, 9602. Archives générales du royaume, Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique (Police des Etrangers), 33C 30/7 (old number).

⁹² *La Voix du peuple*, 31.1.1939.

⁹³ *Le Progrès social*. ..., p. 90.

Belgian workers were allegedly prouder of their professional status, they refused to do menial tasks and demanded a decent salary. The unions insisted that they should have more influence on immigration policy through a Joint Committee including representatives of the government, employers and unions, which would decide together on the annual intake of foreign labour. This corporate handling of labour migration, concomitant with a strict state control over the labour market, would be necessary to preserve good working conditions for the Belgian hospitality worker.⁹⁴ It would also enable the unions to keep the discussion on foreign labour out of the public domain, where it quickly became emotionally charged, partly due to extremist groups making political capital out of the issue.

Conclusion

During the 1930s, the foreign workers who came each season to work in the exclusive hotels at the Belgian seaside and in the Ardennes became the catalyst for the absolute priority of Belgian labour. In this annual battle, a nationalist rhetoric was instrumental in a competition for scarce resources during years of high unemployment. The seasonal workers, reduced to the most despised ethnic groups, be they Italians, Jews or Germans, were charged with being dishonest, being prostitutes and undercutting wages. That the employers were willing to invest in recruiting these workers every year, but most of all that the ministers of labour of different political affiliations conceded, year after year, that they were an indispensable addition to the staff of the *Palaces* during the summer are testimony that the accusations were created out of thin air. That these accusations said more about how the accusers perceived themselves than about the defendants is well illustrated at the end of the 1930s, when other foreigners working in the hotels in the big cities became a target of the xenophobic campaign. While the extreme right-wing organisation pointed to the Jewish personnel among these hotel employees, the communists attacked the Italian and German fascists working in the hotels.

Nationalist organisations, partly of the extreme right, jealously wanted to safeguard Belgium for the Belgians. The idea that foreigners were snapping up the best jobs was intolerable to them. The Belgian trade unions of hospitality workers, both Christian and socialist, were stirred by such emotional appeals. While in other industries the trade unions developed their own strategy, in this sector they merely followed an irrational, nationalist drive. The limited

⁹⁴ Rapport de la Sûreté, 11.3.1939. see footnote 92. ; *L'Alimentation*, vol. 25, no. 5 (1938), pp. 1-2, no. 9, pp. 2-3.

power of the unions in a sector that was difficult to organise, is an explanation of the little resistance they offered to the nationalist rhetoric.

The democratisation of political economy after the First World War had given the trade unions access to political power. The authorities took the complaints of the workers as expressed by the unions to heart and from 1931 onwards, resources were developed to restrict the immigration of foreign labour. From then on, employers could call upon immigrants only if the authorities considered that aliens were needed without them displacing national labour. Notwithstanding the opposition of the trade unions in the hospitality trade, the authorities, contrary to their attitude in other sectors, agreed to the arrival each summer of a few hundred highly qualified workers. For the nationalist organisations and also to a large extent for the trade unions, it was unacceptable that these foreign professionals were considered to be better qualified than their Belgian colleagues. The economic recovery in 1936-1937 meant that this conflict calmed down, but in 1938 when unemployment increased, the question started to get out of hand again. At this time the Belgian authorities lost control over immigration, due to forced migration from Nazi Germany. The nationalist organisations attacked head-on the presence of any foreigner in their trade. Italian workers again became a symbol of what was going wrong in an industry, which was accused of lacking national pride. Although the unions were less enthusiastic about playing the xenophobic card in 1939, they did endorse this campaign. The employers had to oppose, time and again, this demand to nationalise their staffing by pointing out the specificity of their sector, which catered to a highly cosmopolitan clientele. Certainly until 1939 they could convince the authorities that it was in the public interest to employ these seasonal workers, but the employers were fighting an uphill battle to preserve their nineteenth-century liberty to recruit workers as they saw fit. The highly skilled Italian workers employed by the exclusive hotels each summer became the scapegoats of a radical protectionist policy, advocated by both unions. Although these Italians still could do their jobs in the *Palaces*, the protectionist policy they had fed by their mere presence, curtailed the use of foreign labour in the hotel sector and the Belgian economy overall.