

# ARCHIVES AND SOURCES



Fig. 1 The editorial office of the Ghent socialist workers' paper *Vooruit*, about 1900.

## Working-class Voices from the late Nineteenth century: 'Propaganda Pence' in a Socialist Paper in Ghent

by *Bart De Sutter and  
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'Crooked Charles is completely bonkers, 0.10. Instead of a seat in the town council he's got a seat reserved in the nut-house, 0.10.'

'Friends, what do you say? Should we give that blue smotherer who sends his children to the brethren schools a concert with tin pipes, 0.10.'

'I am glad to have received [the journal] *Het Zweepken* [The Little Whip], 0.16 I read it in the gents', 0.10 And then I sent it to its proper destination 0.10.'<sup>1</sup>

These are the wry, humorous words of workers from the Belgian textile city of Ghent, levelled more than 100 years ago against the establishment and their ideological opponents. Their messages accompanied small donations and were published in the socialist party daily, *Vooruit* ('Forward').

'Crooked Charles' was Charles de Hemptinne (1816-1905), the Catholic owner of one of the largest textile factories in Ghent and – as indicated in the above quote – the employer of one particular worker who revelled in being able to speak his mind without inhibition. The 'blue smotherer', now unidentifiable, was threatened with a charivari or 'rough music' because although a liberal free-thinking bourgeois (implied by 'blue' in Belgian usage), he denied ('smothered') Enlightenment ideals by sending his children to a Catholic school of the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity. And finally the Catholic workers' movement journal *Het Zweepken* would go the way of all excreta: down the drain, used as toilet paper.

Social historians, of times before the First World War at least, do not often get to hear such voices so unfiltered.<sup>2</sup> Indeed they face problems that students of contemporary labour are largely spared. Techniques such as participant observation and interviewing are not possible. They may however use methods such as 'reading against the grain' to access the mentalities of ordinary people through elite or middle-class sources. Press reports, statements of poor relief officers, police files and court archives can all offer useful information.

Sources in which 'ordinary people' voice their concerns more directly are scarcer than elite or middle-class documents, but they do exist. Historians of the nineteenth century have used petitions, pauper and emigrant letters and applications for naturalization written by ordinary people.<sup>3</sup> These documents come under the heading of *écritures ordinaires* or *quotidiennes*, which is used to denote the ordinary or everyday writings of daily life: jottings in pocketbooks, diaries, albums, exercise books, graffiti, intimate letters, correspondence with the authorities and so on.<sup>4</sup>

This article focuses on a particular form of ordinary writing that has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves, to be found in newspaper columns recording socialist 'propaganda pence' (*denier de la propagande* in French and *strijdpenning* in Dutch).<sup>5</sup> Through this system the Belgian Workers' Party (BWP: *Belgische Werkliedenpartij* or *Parti ouvrier belge*) collected money from its members to keep the party press running. To make giving more attractive the donor could formulate a brief accompanying statement for publication in the dedicated 'propaganda-pence' section of the party papers. Usually these were short messages (one to five lines) in colloquial language. Published at least twice a week in the daily *Vooruit*, each time containing several dozen statements, they soon made up an eighth to a quarter of the total copy. For the whole of the *belle époque* era there are tens of thousands in *Vooruit* alone.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of subscription lists was, of course, well known in many European countries among different social and ideological groups. The idea was to collect money through the press for a particular practical goal. In December 1898, for instance, the anti-semitic and nationalist French paper *La Libre Parole* opened a subscription list to support the widow of Hubert Joseph Henry, Alfred Dreyfus's main opponent.

It published eighteen lists of donors and the amounts they gave, each donation accompanied by a short anti-semitic statement. The '*Monument Henry*' – as this subscription list was called by its supporters – is an exception in that it has attracted the attention of historians.<sup>7</sup> Research on these subscription lists in general, and on the socialist propaganda pence in particular, is thin on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

This article will examine the socialist propaganda pence of Ghent through the prism of James C. Scott's concepts of public and hidden transcripts. According to Scott the less powerful in society adopt a strategic discourse when addressing their superiors. This so-called 'public transcript' functions as 'the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate', or 'the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen'.<sup>9</sup> Yet we cannot take this public transcript at face value because 'every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant'.<sup>10</sup> There is no hard, clear-cut division between the two. 'The hidden transcript . . . never becomes a language apart. The mere fact that it is in constant dialogue – more accurately, in argument – with dominant values ensures that the hidden and public transcripts remain mutually intelligible'.<sup>11</sup> To our mind all communication has, in varying degrees, both hidden and public characteristics. The propaganda-pence statements, for example, have decidedly 'hidden' qualities, with their use of the 'uninhibited' language of workers, while at the same time they are also public, appearing openly in a socialist paper.

Scott's transcripts can be related to the concept of *Eigen-Sinn* used by Alf Lüdtke in his work on interwar Germany to designate a characteristic of workers and subordinate people which involves suspicion of bourgeois respectability, as well as of the expectations of their own (labour) organizations.<sup>12</sup> Lüdtke defines it as 'wilfulness, spontaneous self-will, a kind of self-affirmation, an act of (re)appropriating alienated social relations on and off the shop floor by self-assertive prankishness, demarcating a space of one's own'.<sup>13</sup> In practice *Eigen-Sinn* was manifested in resistance to socialization from above; it was a subversive appropriation of imposed values, involving ironical dealings with authority figures and symbolic inversions of given power relations.

#### INTRODUCING THE PROPAGANDA PENCE

At the end of the nineteenth century the printing of papers was democratized, in part because production costs declined with mechanization. Although publishing a paper came within the reach of organizations run by workers, it remained an expensive endeavour and the working-class press was hard put to make ends meet. In the Belgian socialist case, papers were partly financed through the successful consumer co-operatives of the Belgian Workers' Party (founded in 1885). Additional funding came from so-called subscription lists through which ordinary members could make

small donations. This practice had begun in 1875 with the introduction of a separate subscription section, called the propaganda pence, in the Antwerp paper *De Werker* (The Worker), official organ of the Belgian section of the First International. Donors could henceforth complement their gift with a short published statement. The phenomenon spread to Ghent and Brussels, and over the Belgian border to Vlissingen and Amsterdam, where the Dutch socialist papers, *Recht voor Allen* (Justice for All) and *Ons Blad* (Our Paper), featured a propaganda-pence section.<sup>14</sup> The Belgian anti-socialist Catholic labour movement imitated the practice in its Ghent paper *Het Volk* (The People) from February 1896 onwards.

The Ghent socialist propaganda pence, publicized in *Vooruit* from 1886, was the most successful of all such initiatives, yielding substantial sums (in 1894, for instance, 6,018.25 Belgian francs: as much as 200 cotton spinners would earn in a week).<sup>15</sup> The party actively encouraged its propaganda-pence fund by publishing the proceeds half-yearly in its paper and naming and shaming towns that 'had not fulfilled their duty' – *Vooruit* received propaganda pence from all over the country as it was the main Dutch-language socialist paper.<sup>16</sup> Appeals in *Vooruit*, pamphlets, and posters reminded workers of their duty to donate.

The success of the Ghent propaganda-pence fund reflected the overall achievements of the town's socialist movement. Before the First World War Ghent was the capital of Belgian socialism and the country's most proletarian city, with the highest ratio of factory workers to the total population. The Ghent socialists were the driving force behind the founding of a unified party for the whole of Belgium and they introduced the 'Ghent model' all over the country (successful consumer co-operatives providing the financial base for all other activities). The textile industry dominated in Ghent, but there was a relatively broad industrial base, including metal-working and docks. The workforce of the city was mainly proletarian rather than artisan. This was reflected in the socialist-dominated local labour movement. It was the weavers, the lowest paid, least skilled and least respected group in the textile industry, who formed the backbone of Ghent socialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century spinners, mechanics, and woodworkers were taking over the leadership. Because of the slow growth of its textile industry, Ghent had a low immigration rate. People hardly moved, and tended to live in the same neighbourhood from generation to generation. The result was a tight local sociability which formed the basis for the strong organizational loyalty (*Organisationspatriotismus*)<sup>17</sup> felt for *Moeder Vooruit* – or Mother Forward – the affectionate name by which the Ghent socialist movement came to be known, from its consumer co-operative and its paper, *Vooruit*. Working-class support for *Vooruit* was massive. In the municipal elections of 1907, for instance, two thirds of all male workers voted socialist. The *Vooruit* paper had a circulation of 20,000 to 25,000 copies around 1900. This made it the most widely read paper in Ghent, which had about 160,000 inhabitants at the time.

There were three ways for Ghent workers to have their statements published in the propaganda-pence section of the *Vooruit* paper. In the early years, they had to dictate or write down their statement on a subscription list at the paper's headquarters or in one of the party premises in the town. Later, with the success of the scheme, the party sent collectors out to pick up donations and statements at socialist meetings, in cafés, or even at the workers' homes (the socialist co-operatives did home deliveries of bread and coal). Finally, it was possible to mail a statement to the paper, enclosing stamps instead of money. The collected statements were published at least twice a week. Subdivided according to provenance, most were from Ghent, but some came from places as diverse as Bruges, Liège and Lille, as *Vooruit* was the BWP paper for all Dutch-speaking Belgians and even for Flemish immigrant workers in the north of France.

A 'complete' propaganda-pence statement would take the following form, with three components: 'My brother has made his first Communion, P., 0.10'.<sup>18</sup> The statement was followed by the author's initials or full name and then the sum donated, for instance 0.10 Belgian francs (10 centimes). Very often the author remained anonymous. And not every statement included an author, because individuals could hand in multiple messages so long as each one was paid for. For instance, 'How will you ever get a wife, 0.10; you pass yourself off as a pastry-cook who earns 35 francs a week and still you have no luck with women, 0.10; what's wrong with you, boy, 0.05'.<sup>19</sup> Such composite statements often told (ultra) short stories.

We can distinguish between 'empty' statements and those fraught with meaning. The former merely give the name of the individual donor ('Bruno, 0.05'),<sup>20</sup> the organization or group responsible for the gift ('From the vendors of the journal *Vooruit*, 1.90'),<sup>21</sup> or the circumstances of the collection ('Collected at Frans Herri's wedding at [the] *Vooruit* [hall], 1.67').<sup>22</sup> The latter, 'meaningful' statements, offer thematic reflections on workers' living conditions. In 1898 *Vooruit* described the functions of the pence columns:

Not only does this section give one the opportunity to tell a joke, say hello to a friend, talk to an acquaintance, denounce an abuse, decry an oppressor, open one's heart, one can also formulate elevated thoughts and proverbs in the propaganda pence, exercise oneself in thinking and writing about socialism and everything that concerns working people.<sup>23</sup>

Socialist sentiments included: 'If our opponents want to conquer our red flag, it will be over our dead bodies, our flag is our life, the young gymnasts, 14',<sup>24</sup> 'Capitalism resembles an animal, whose open mouth is constantly ready to devour other people's goods, 0.10'.<sup>25</sup> A fair number of workers denounced their miserable work and living conditions, and many took aim against their opponents and the authorities:

'To be a factory supervisor you have to be a slave driver, 0.10'.<sup>26</sup>

'The secretary of the [Catholic] union in Oudburg street had better keep his trap shut rather than blame the clerks in his idiot paper . . . , 0.10.'<sup>27</sup>  
 'Their propaganda lately has proved they fully deserve the name of sewer-rats, 0.10.'<sup>28</sup>  
 'The tyrant Lippens [Liberal mayor of Ghent] will choke in his own filth, 0.65.'<sup>29</sup>

Workers also struck up conversations and replied to each other's messages. Someone from the town of Mechelen asked: 'Nephews Alp. Sch. and Fr. Pr., how is your health, your nephew Fr. L., 0.10.'<sup>30</sup> A week later the answer came from Ghent: 'Nephew Fr. L. all is well, Alp. Sch., 0.10; Nephew Fr. L., it couldn't be better, Fr. Pr., 0.10.'<sup>31</sup> Some made personal announcements or commented on their daily life: 'I will not beat my wife, 0.10';<sup>32</sup> 'I diced a Four-Of-A-Kind in the *Visite* [café], Emiel D., 0.10.'<sup>33</sup> A rough estimate indicates that nearly half of all statements were 'empty', twenty per cent were ideologically inspired socialist comments, and the remaining thirty per cent were individual (often private) musings about daily life.

#### PROPAGANDA PENCE AND *ÉCRITURES ORDINAIRES*

The propaganda-pence statements are a form of *écritures ordinaires*. This concept has two common definitions. Daniel Fabre singles out the objective of writing: unlike writing for print and publication (where in what he calls '*la consécration de l'imprimé*' only the printed word is revered), *écritures ordinaires* depart from standardized written language, are spontaneous and do not in any sense claim to be an art form.<sup>34</sup> Martyn Lyons places more stress on social origin: ordinary writings are produced by people from the lower classes.<sup>35</sup> Identifying propaganda-pence authors is only possible in exceptional cases. Yet we may safely assume that a large portion were ordinary workers (BWP members or sympathizers) rather than party cadres, as they did not heed the official guidelines on contributions (especially about gossip and libel, see below). At the same time they did not belong to the lowest stratum of the Ghent textile proletariat as they were both militant and comfortable enough to donate money to the party. This seems to reflect the overall composition of the Ghent rank and file, which did not mainly consist of either labour aristocracy or *lumpenproletariat* (the affiliation fee for joining the socialist co-operatives was too steep for the lowest classes). It was situated somewhere in between, in a large stratum of averagely skilled and remunerated factory workers.<sup>36</sup>

Like other forms of ordinary writing, the propaganda-pence statements have characteristics of both oral and written communication and of both individual and collective activity. The statements, though written, were often in dialect and sometimes employed phonetic language terms unfamiliar in standard Dutch. The contributors need not themselves have been literate – in the last quarter of the nineteenth century half of all textile workers in Ghent (46.8% of all male and 54.7% of all female workers) were unable to

read and write – but this did not stop them from voicing their concerns. 'Mediated literacy' was significant.<sup>37</sup> Newspaper sellers, acquaintances and even officially appointed 'propaganda-pence writers' were at hand to help.<sup>38</sup> The pence contributions were indeed a social activity. On Sundays and after meetings people often came together to write the contributions collectively. This is clear from statements such as: 'I am a socialist and I will remain one, 0.10. Me too, 0.10',<sup>39</sup> or: 'I don't care, 0.10. Just put something on paper, 0.10'<sup>40</sup> (obviously said by someone dictating but without inspiration). In places where socialists gathered singing, dancing, and dining sometimes accompanied the collection of propaganda pence. The following statements were all gathered in the 'red' café, 't *Vliegende Paard* [The flying horse], run by M. Charles:

*Miserere* sung by P. Rousseau, 0.10. At M. Charles's, *Land van Waas* street, 0.10. Afterwards the *Choir of the Nieuwbrug* was sung, 0.10... And all the neighbours of the cité [small narrow alleyway off a street housing workers] danced along, 0.10 The turkey and salad were all finished, 0.10. Next week people will give even more, 0.10. We won't stop giving, 0.10... The eel seller also gave a dime, 0.40. *I was sacked* sung by an old guy 0.10. *The poor poet*, sung by Gust den Beer, 0.10. *Bloody snowflakes*, sung by Pol R., 0.10. Given by 10 dice players, 0.10. This was all collected at M. Charles's in 't *Vliegende Paard*, 0.10.<sup>41</sup>

If writing or dictating the statements was a social affair, so too was reading them. A *Vooruit* journalist wrote in 1898: 'We all know what joy, what satisfaction it brings when one reads or has someone read one's words, one's thoughts, yes, even one's jokes and cracks in the propaganda pence'.<sup>42</sup> Because they were read out aloud in socialist public places, we assume that the contributions of illiterates were taken down fairly accurately, and not manipulated by the writer.

#### EIGEN-SINN OR THE PROPAGANDA PENCE AS A HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT

For a hidden transcript to surface, two conditions need to be met, according to James Scott: 'first, ... it is voiced in a sequestered social site where the control, surveillance, and repression of the dominant are least able to reach, and, second, ... this sequestered social milieu is composed entirely of close confidants who share similar experiences of domination'.<sup>43</sup> The propaganda-pence writings fulfil both criteria. The fact that they were out in the open does not disqualify them from acting as a hidden transcript. Factory owners, bourgeois adversaries, despised foremen, and other dominant groups could read the pence statements, but for such outsiders (as for historians) understanding them might not be so easy. And because of their anonymity the pence statements provided no means to control or punish the contributors. Neither, for that matter, could BWP officials

easily interfere. Senior party echelons sometimes expressed irritation with the 'deplorable' quality of the pence messages. As early as 1878 the highest executive council of the Ghent socialists complained that they were an 'idiotic hodgepodge' of libel, gossip and 'mostly insignificant words'.<sup>44</sup> *Vooruit* tried to streamline the pence by, for instance, insisting that statements should be short and edifying.<sup>45</sup> There did occur occasional censorship, indicated by the phrase 'personal statement not published',<sup>46</sup> but the (very attentive) readers were quick to denounce this, and *Vooruit*'s editors let them: 'I protest against the shortening or suppressing of statements, 0.10';<sup>47</sup> 'I will keep on giving for the pence provided that my statements are not changed or withheld, 0.10'.<sup>48</sup> Some were even ironic or sarcastic about official intervention: 'Lest the editors should fail to improve my statements, 0.05'.<sup>49</sup> Overall we have the impression that the party guidelines were hardly ever strictly enforced, so that donors would not be put off. Ultimately, the pence statements were explicitly published 'outside the responsibility of the editorial board'. Seen in this light, the pence were a site of *Eigen-Sinn* directed occasionally against the 'civilizing' attempts of the socialist movement itself.

As hidden transcript the propaganda-pence statements had three major functions: socializing and disciplining those who posted and read them into a cohesive group; emphasizing the boundaries with outsiders; and inverting the prevailing social relations. The propaganda-pence section functioned as a socializing tool for workers. Those who behaved improperly were called to order. Upstarts, for instance, were mocked: 'Workers beware, 0.10. At work he wears shoes, but he goes home in his clogs, 0.10'.<sup>50</sup> Strikebreakers and police informers received warnings: 'There is a scab who calls himself a socialist, 0.10. He'd better not. 0.10'.<sup>51</sup> 'The man was beside himself, 0.15. When he was denounced in the propaganda pence as an informer, 0.15. You cannot call him a snitch, 0.15. Because he might bite, 0.15. But we will do a collection in time, 0.15. To buy him a muzzle to wear, 0.15'.<sup>52</sup> A worker who had just gone to Holland to meet with anarchists at a time of great tension between the anarchists and the social democrats received the message: 'If you continue to scoff, 0.10. We will get you, 0.10'.<sup>53</sup> Anarchists who rejected the 'bourgeois' methods of the Ghent socialist co-operative movement were accused of siding with the enemies of the proletariat in order to divide the working class: 'The two dozen revolutionaries (?) have increased the smotherers' clique with some extra papists, 0.05'.<sup>54</sup>

The propaganda-pence statements, however, also show the limits of socialist socialization. Not all workers, for instance, followed the party's anti-clericalism. Some took part in Catholic festivities and made no effort to disguise it. A certain A.V. announced: 'Sunday we ate buns from the [socialist] meeting centre for the inauguration of a new parish priest in the Saint Peter's neighbourhood, 0.10. The priest himself ate some, 0.10. And everyone thought they were really good, A.V., 0.05'.<sup>55</sup> A.V. considered



the priest eating 'red' buns the ultimate irony, but at the same time he himself had been present at the inauguration festivities.

A second important feature of the propaganda-pence section was the taunting of the socialists' opponents. This clearly delineated those whom the correspondents defined themselves against. The four main groups were the Catholic labour movement, factory owners, the bourgeoisie, and the authorities, groups which in some cases overlapped.

The arch-enemy of the Ghent socialists at the end of the nineteenth century was not so much the bourgeoisie as fellow workers who had 'fallen' for the Catholic labour organization. This Christian workers' movement had been founded by paternalist Catholic factory owners to fight the 'red menace'. The 'anti-socialists', as they explicitly called themselves, copied the organizational activities of their adversaries, from unions, co-operative societies and the press down to the propaganda pence. The intense competition which ensued made the relations between both groups tense. A third of all statements in our sample took aim at the anti-socialists, for whom the term 'smotherers' was originally coined – if we add to these all anti-clerical and anti-religious statements they amount to half of our sample. On 6 November 1886, the day when the first Catholic workers' paper, *De Lichtstraal* (The Light Beam), came out, the propaganda pence in *Vooruit* contained the following jibe: 'We wish *De Lichtstraal*, the stillborn child, a safe journey, 0.15'.<sup>56</sup> Other typical taunts read: 'hold your nose, readers...0.15';<sup>57</sup> 'There is no lower form of life than smotherers, 0.05. They always talk about the working man and are paid as secret police informers to work against the working people, 0.05. It's strange, they are only concerned about the workers' fate where the socialists are strongest, what a joke, 0.05. The smotherers' clique does indeed have good intentions with the working men...to hoodwink them, 0.05'.<sup>58</sup>

A characteristic often attributed by socialist workers to their opponents was inconsistency, in that they did not live up to the standards they impressed on the lower classes. The anti-clerical Liberal bourgeois were exposed for forgoing their principles:

How the Liberals work: His Lordship in the Liberal Association, Her Ladyship in church and Miss in the convent for her... education, 0.20. How the Liberals marry: the daughter of a rich Liberal factory owner to a bald Catholic nobleman, 0.25. The Liberals at home: on Fridays His Lordship goes to dinner at the hotel because Her Ladyship does not want to serve meat, 0.20.<sup>59</sup>

Especially in sexual matters, socialist workers accused all of their adversaries of hypocrisy, debauchery, and moral degeneration. 'Because the tall foreman from the *Lys* [factory] received a good beating, 0.10. Because he will no

longer try to catch mice behind the cupboard [i.e. feel up women on the sly], 0.10'.<sup>60</sup> Jan Casier de Hemptinne (1820-92), a notorious Catholic factory owner, was commemorated in the propaganda-pence section: 'Alas, he has died, he loved the people and especially the women . . . , [0].10'.<sup>61</sup> A recurring charge against priests was paedophilia: 'Parents, keep your children away from the confessional box, if you remember the questions priests asked you when you were young, you will know why, 0.20'.<sup>62</sup> Another statement read: 'It [a socialist meeting] was more dignified, papists, 0.10. Than in your caverns, 0.10. Where young girls play 'grow the tree' [a popular children's game that in this context signals a sexual connotation] with the parish priest, 0.10. To whom it may concern, 0.10'.<sup>63</sup> The latter was a warning to a particular priest. Indeed, as we have already seen with the quote about the tin-pipe charivari, warnings were uttered in the pence: 'The smotherers and scabs from the *vlotmachien* [probably a reference to a workshop] sacked someone last week, 0.25. And because of those slaves he will get two lawsuits, 0.25 Beware cowards, an end will be put to this, 0.25'.<sup>64</sup> These threats bring us to a last function of the propaganda-pence section.

A third major characteristic of the propaganda pence's hidden transcript was its symbolic inversions of power relations. The subordinate could turn the tables on the dominant, a central function of *Eigen-sinn*. On occasion they did this literally by inverting the names of their opponents. The Catholic paper *Nieuws van den Dag* (News of the Day) became *Nieuws van den Nacht* (News of the Night), *De Vrije Werker* (the Free Worker) *De Gedwongen Werker* (the Unfree Worker). The Liberal workers' organization *De Vrijheidsliefde* (Love of Freedom) became *Kruipersliefde* (Love of Crawlers). Diminutives were frequently used to belittle the socialists' opponents, for instance against the Catholic workers' movement's paper *Het Volk* (The People): '*Het Volkje* (The Little People) should become larger because it is no longer large enough to wrap up its readers' sandwiches, 0.10'.<sup>65</sup>

As the pence section provided anonymity, socialist workers could voice opinions about their 'betters' that would have cost them dearly in other circumstances. They criticized social abuses without inhibition, whether minor: 'they should scrub the toilets better at Karel De Hemptinne's [factory], 0.30';<sup>66</sup> or major: 'The bosses are acquitted; the dockers are convicted. No, there is no class justice, P.D.V., 0.15'.<sup>67</sup> They could insult their boss's wife with impunity: 'If the lady of the house wants to act like a pig, she had better go to the animal market, 0.05';<sup>68</sup> or ridicule the authorities. When in the spring of 1886 a huge labour revolt swept across Belgium, the hated King Leopold II was mocked: 'Pol, old chap, you 'd better leave before it is too late, 0.10; Pol, you are soiling your pants, aren't you, 0.10; Pol, you'd better grease up your legs to get running, 0.10'.<sup>69</sup> Workers addressed their superiors with a gleeful lack of respect. General Vandersmissen, who was notorious for the bloody repression of workers' protests, was called a 'blood-hound'.<sup>70</sup> The Liberal mayor of Ghent was denounced for the

same reason: 'Out of enormous love for our mayor, the basher, 0.10'.<sup>71</sup> Sarcasm and irony were powerful tools for re-establishing self-esteem. Socialist workers reappropriated the disparaging labels their opponents stuck to them, calling themselves 'canaille' or 'slaves'. When Edouard Anseele, the leader of the Ghent socialists, was accused by the Catholic paper *De Gentenaar* (The Ghent townsman) of being a slumlord, someone replied in the propaganda pence: 'Message to the "Liar" [i.e. *De Gentenaar*]. Anseele has again bought some houses: I saw him leave the *bazar* [department store] with them, 0.20'.<sup>72</sup> Irony and sarcasm were sometimes explicitly flagged with question or exclamation marks: 'Liberals and papists are geniuses, (?), 0.10'.<sup>73</sup> A conscript from the Brussels district of Kuregem commented: 'For the royal service I left my fatherland (?), soldier in the 13th line regiment'.<sup>74</sup> Another opined: 'We will supply good royalist!!! soldiers to the army, 0.10'.<sup>75</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The propaganda-pence material offers access to the everyday world of socialist workers. Although their discourse was by no means unmediated, it allows us to come closer to their hidden transcript. The anonymity provided in the propaganda-pence section made it a safe place for correspondents to voice their concerns, in contrast to many other areas of their social lives. In terms of the hidden transcript the section had at least three functions: creating, socializing and disciplining the collective community of writers and readers; drawing clear boundaries to exclude those who did not belong to this symbolic community; and inverting the prevailing social relations. The latter is an illustration of what Alf Lüdtke calls *Eigen-Sinn* and shows that strikes were not the only way that socialist workers expressed their disaffection. They resisted what was forced on them by adapting imposed values to their own mental framework, by ironically defying figures of authority, and by symbolically mirroring their own subordinate position on to the dominant. At the same time, the propaganda-pence writings also demonstrate that they defied not only the establishment but sometimes the socialist cadres too.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 *Vooruit*, 14 Feb. 1890, pp. 3–4; 2 June 1893, p. 4; 5 May 1899, p. 3.
- 2 Of course no discourse is unmediated. In this case we should refer to ‘voices not filtered through a bourgeois lens’, as they are mediated in other ways (see below).
- 3 See for example, *International Review of Social History* 46, 2001 (special issue on petitions); *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* 56: 4–5, 2001 (special issue on ‘Pratiques d’écriture’); Wendy Cameron, Mary McDougall Maude and Sheila Haines, *English Immigrant Voices: Labourers’ Letters from Upper Canada in the 1830’s*, Montreal, 2000; David Englander, ‘From the Abyss: Pauper Petitions and Correspondence in Victorian London’, *London Journal* 25, 2000; Thomas Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837*, Oxford, 2001; Laura Tabili, ‘“Having Lived Close Beside Them All the Time”: Negotiating National Identities through Personal Networks’, *Journal of Social History* 39: 2, 2005.
- 4 See *Par écrit. Ethnologie des écritures quotidiennes*, ed. Daniel Fabre, Paris, 1997; *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives*, ed. Martyn Lyons, Bern, 2007.
- 5 We have chosen to translate the term *denier de propagande* and *strijdpenning* literally as *propaganda pence*, by analogy with the so-called *denier de Saint-Pierre, Peterspfennig* and *Peter’s pence/penny*, a practice by which Roman Catholics donated money to the Holy See, which might be the inspiration for the propaganda pence.
- 6 This research is based on a random sample of 18,750 separate statements from the period 1886–1900. Bart De Sutter, ‘Over dompers, mouchards en papen. Constructie van identiteit, via humor. Casus: de Gentse socialistische Strijdpenning in Vooruit (1886–1900)’ (‘About smotherers, snitches and papists. The construction of identity through humour. Case: the Ghent socialist propaganda pence in Vooruit (1886–1900)’), unpublished master’s thesis, Ghent University, 2008).
- 7 For example, Danielle Delmaire, ‘Antisémitisme des catholiques au vingtième siècle: de la revendication au refus’, in *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. Kay Chadwick, Liverpool, 2000, p. 27.
- 8 Propaganda pence or similar practices are summarily mentioned in some publications on the Belgian, Dutch and Italian labour movements: Dennis Bos, *Waarachtige volksvrienden. De vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam 1848–1894*, Amsterdam, 2001, p. 404; Bart De Wilde, ‘Seks op en naast de werkvloer. De seksualiteitsbeleving van arbeiders en de houding van de vakbeweging’, *Begeerte heeft ons aangeraakt: socialisten, sekse en seksualiteit*, Gent, 1999, p. 158; Holde Lhoest-Offerman, *Recueil de documents relatifs à la propagande des mouvements socialistes au XIXe siècle à Bruxelles*, Archives générales du Royaume, Bruxelles, 1967, p. 34; Maurizio Ridolfi, ‘“L’industria della propaganda” e il partito: stampa e editoria nel socialismo italiano prefascista’, *Studi storici* 1, 1992.
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- 14 Bert Altena, ‘Een broeinest der anarchie: arbeiders, arbeidersbeweging en maatschappelijke ontwikkeling: Vlissingen 1875–1929 (1940)’, Thesis, Amsterdam, 1989, p. 14; Bos, *Waarachtige volksvrienden*, p. 404.
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