

Belgium rocked by protests as people stand up against 'pomocracy'

by Rosa Tennenbaum

In Belgium, as in other countries, political scandals have become part of everyday politics, but what was revealed to the public in the last few weeks, was just too much: a ring of pedophiles, killers, blackmailers, and thieves, directed by Marc Dutroux, operating with the protection of the highest-level political circles in the country. At least four girls were killed by Dutroux's gang, including two who were starved to death. Over several years, investigations yielded no results, until investigator Jean-Marc Connerrotte took over the case. He identified Dutroux, and put him behind bars; he rescued two girls out of their hell of captivity; and he even managed to put people such as Alain Van der Biest, a former government minister, into prison. It is no surprise that Connerrotte became a very popular public figure.

Thus, the decision of the highest Belgian court, on Oct. 14, to remove Connerrotte from the case, hit like a bombshell. In the same hour that this decision became known, spontaneous protests started all over the country. Everywhere, workers put down their tools and went into the streets to vent their anger. They were joined by housewives and students; teachers left their classrooms with their students to demonstrate; firemen blew their horns; engineers stopped their trains at noon-time for 30 minutes; bus drivers followed their example; garbage collectors formed their trucks into caravans to protest. In the port of Antwerp, the lock-keepers went on strike; in Namur and Charleroi, the birthplace of Dutroux, bus drivers went on strike for the whole day; workers of the national telephone company walked out; workers at an aeronautics factory blocked the streets to a nearby airport; students occupied the judicial palace in Antwerp and set up a vigil; and the fire brigade in Liège drove their trucks downtown and turned their water cannons against the Justice building to demonstrate that "the whole judicial system needs a good cleanup." Even in the southern part of the Netherlands, 600 workers at the Nedcar auto factory stopped work for one hour in remembrance of the murdered children. All these protests were spontaneous—no trade union, no social grouping had organized them. And they were only the beginning.

Connerrotte was made a scapegoat by the high court. Connerrotte, who uncovered the biggest judicial scandal in the history of the country, was found guilty by the highest judges of having attended a dinner sponsored by the Children Funds,

together with State Attorney Bourlet. There, the two little girls whom Connerrotte had freed from Dutroux, honored him with a bouquet of flowers and a pen. The Children Funds "donated" to each judge a plate of spaghetti. The organizers of this meeting wanted to raise funds for the mother of a kidnapped girl, who lacked money to pay her lawyer. That was evidence, according to the high court, that Connerrotte was biased; they removed him from the case, despite the fact that a number of judicial officials had made clear beforehand, that the Children Funds were not an interested party in any court case, and therefore the investigator was only taking a clear position against crime in general, and not for any particular party.

The background

This was not the first time that Connerrotte's investigations had been sabotaged. In 1992, the high court had dismissed Connerrotte from another hot case: the murder of André Cools, who had been vice prime minister and head of the Socialist Party of Wallonia. He was involved in the so-called "Augusta" affair, in which the Italian helicopter manufacturer Augusta bribed Belgian politicians to supply the Italian Army with their helicopters. Shortly before Cools was killed in 1991, he had announced that he would name the names of everybody who was involved in this bribery, which was connected to the "Iran-Contra" scandal.

Already back then, Connerrotte had identified and arrested suspects who were set free again by the court in Liège. Even though this was a clear indication of a judicial coverup, nothing was done. The same was true in the case of the investigating judge in Charleroi, who had put aside dossiers on suspicious activities of certain policemen.

Instead, the single successful investigator, Connerrotte, was now being dismissed for a second time.

These facts, nourished the suspicion in the Belgian population, that the child abduction case, too, was to be suppressed because of its links to the highest political circles. Such suspicions were compounded by public statements of some of the highest judges—such as the honorary chairman of the highest court, André Mazy, who defamed the two investigators as "cowboys" and "demagogues," "unreasonably lucky" in their search for the criminals, and who dis-



The "White March" in Brussels, Belgium on Oct. 20, to protest the government's coverup of crimes committed by high-level pedophiles and murderers. The kidnapping and murder of four young girls is being linked to other unsolved crimes, including the 1992 murder of former Vice Prime Minister André Cools.

missed the mourning parents as "sick people." In addition, people who pointed out that a coverup was being perpetrated, suddenly came under political and physical attack. An activist for children's rights, Marie France Botte, for example, who expressed her fear that high representatives of the state may have built up a ring of ritual killers, was assaulted in front of her apartment. She escaped her would-be killer, but was seriously injured.

Everything indicates that the population is right to suspect a coverup. Newspapers such as *La Libre Belgique* reported that Connerrotte had successfully tracked down high-level officials involved in the murder case. He managed to confiscate 5,000 videos, in which child abusers were filmed in their orgies; apparently the intent of whoever made the films was to blackmail the abusers afterwards. High officials in politics, law enforcement, the judiciary, the different parties, and so on, are said to have been captured on tape *in flagrante delicto*. The tapes are now being evaluated, under utmost secrecy.

The 'White March'

The population responded to all these disgusting revelations with an unprecedented wave of protests, reaching a high point, the "White March," on Sunday, Oct. 20. The parents of the girls who had been killed by the Dutroux ring, called the huge demonstration to Brussels, the capital of Belgium.

Out of the nation's 10 million inhabitants, around 325,000 people came—three times the number that was expected. From grandmothers to babies, everybody participated in the march. The demonstration had to leave much earlier from its staging area, Gare du Nord, just to make room for the thousands more constantly streaming into the city.

It was one of the biggest demonstrations in the history of the country, one which "had a touch of the year of change 1989," Belgian media observed, referring to the mass rallies in Leipzig, East Germany, that brought down the communist regime. Demonstrators accused the judicial system of complicity with Dutroux, and demanded that the crimes be investigated and cracked ruthlessly. They demanded the heads of high-level officials involved in the coverup, and that the judicial apparatus (which is not independent in Belgium, but staffed and controlled by the parties in power), be reformed. Throughout the country, literally every second house is decorated with a white banner or bed sheet, to make known their solidarity with the movement. White, the symbol of purity and innocence, became the color of this movement.

The protests have already produced results. Right before the march, King Albert II, in a speech to a seminar on child abuse and missing children in Brussels voiced his concern about the moral condition of the judicial system. "One of the state's main duties is to ensure the security of all its citizens,

and particularly the most vulnerable ones: our children," the king said. "This drama must be totally clarified, along with its origins and its ramifications." Such statements that clearly exceeded the king's constitutional status, which obliges him to refrain from interference in political affairs.

The strength of the protests forced Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene to meet with the victims' parents after the demonstration. He promised definite measures to clean out what everybody calls the "pornocracy." The parliament felt compelled to finally agree to a reform of the judicial system, to make it independent.

Bring morality back into politics

This scandal hits a people who have already suffered much at the hands of the politicians. The government has imposed draconian austerity measures, and still unemployment is rising. At the beginning of this year, the parliament handed over emergency powers to the government, in a desperate attempt to meet the European Union's Maastricht Treaty criteria, at any price. One newspaper quoted a trade union representative at Volkswagen, Brussels, as saying: "We are totally fed up with people in high places telling us what is good and what is bad for us, whether it be the high court, or the people who tell us our salaries are too high and that we should join the single currency."

People are standing up against these policies, across ethnic and national borders. Three weeks ago, British papers were gloating that this scandal would finally tear the country apart, which has always been divided along ethnic lines between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. Exactly the opposite happened. In their grievance and anger, people closed ranks against corruption and political incompetence. "We are one country and are standing up for one cause," was one of the slogans at the march. People are asserting a "common humanity that has risen above the squalid deals of a political class that has failed the nation," the *London Times* admitted on Oct. 21. "Belgian society remains steeped in the precepts of mainstream Roman Catholicism. Last weekend, those moral certainties challenged the political establishment to live up to its responsibilities."

Strikes, demonstrations, and protests continued throughout the week after the march. The scandal around the pedophile ring was just the detonator, which sparked the widespread anger and frustration about the economic and political situation. As the mother of one of the missing children said at the "White March": "We owe a lot to these dead children, for a new force is born, thanks to them."

That force wants to put morality back on the agenda; the movement is carried by moral principles, for humanity and justice. The Belgians are discovering the power of the people, or, as one marcher said: "It is as if we were waking up from a bad dream. . . . It is urgent to put morality back in the running of this country."

Italian prosecutors close in on 'new P-2'

by Claudio Celani

The Sept. 15 arrest of Lorenzo Necci, general manager of Italy's national railway company, is threatening Italy with consequences which observers describe as potentially more devastating than the 1993 "Tangentopoli" corruption scandals that rocked the country's post-war political system. The scandals have had the immediate effect of jeopardizing Italy's largest infrastructure project. But there is more to it than that.

Necci was the architect of a 36,000-billion lira plan for high-speed railway construction, which had just started to be implemented. The project consists of east-west routes, from Turin to Venice, which would be connected to the French high-speed network and to the central and eastern European networks through new tunnels under the Alps. A north-south line would stretch from Milan to Naples. Although the project has some critical weaknesses, especially in its financing, Necci worked for five years to rationalize the structure of the national railway company, Ferrovie dello Stato (FS), and the project finally did get under way. Work began on the Rome-Naples, Milan-Bologna, and Florence-Bologna lines, all involving the largest private and state-owned construction companies, such as FIAT, ENI, and IRI.

The whole project is now thrown into doubt, even if the government did quickly replace Necci as president of the FS, and Transport Minister Claudio Burlando stated that the work will not be interrupted. But the prosecutors who arrested Necci and are keeping him in jail, are focussing on a suspected system of illegal bribes which involves all contractors for the Alta Velocità project. Therefore, developments in the investigation could easily block the project.

Also targeted for investigation is Public Works Minister Antonio Di Pietro, the former "Operation Clean Hands" prosecutor, who had just announced a vast program for building and upgrading highways, aqueducts, and roads, especially in southern Italy. Di Pietro was apparently supporting construction of the famous "Messina Bridge," to connect Sicily to the mainland.

All these infrastructural projects had been attacked by radical ecologists, such as Environment Minister Edo Ronchi, and by Treasury Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who