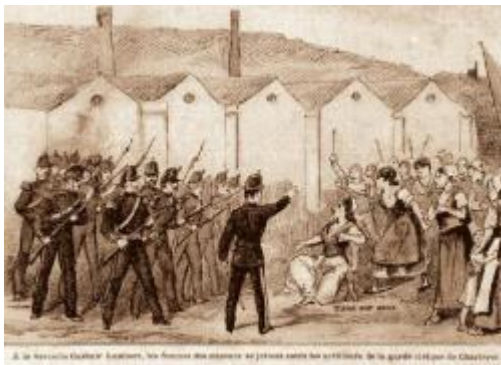# 2. Reform of capitalism

The socio-economic context at the end of the late nineteenth century

The depression at the end of 1885, the new wage cuts and more severe working conditions imposed by the bosses of the glassworks, driven to take such unpopular measures by the increased competition consequent on the introduction and extensions of the continuous glass melting furnace, inflamed the world of workers, causing riots to suddenly flare up in the industrial areas of Liege and Charleroi.

Serious workers' strikes broke out on March 26, 27 and 28, 1886 in Liege and then in Charleroi. Henri Lambert finished his university studies while major labour riots shook people to their core with their degree of violence and bloodiness. They spared no one in the glass-making region of Charleroi.

After the shock of 1886, in Belgium there was a significant dual evolution: that of worker organisations and that of capitalism, particularly in the glass industry. "The window glass industry did not remain outside this development, but it had certain special characteristics: labour became grouped in associations eerily reminiscent of the corporations of the *ancien régime*, while firms, under the deceptive legal appearance of limited liability companies employing a large number of workers, remained family businesses in their essence and their methods." Thus, the labour union Glassworkers Union and in 1894 the New Glassworkers Union, profiting from the relative scarcity of skilled labour (blowers), developed and conducted a veritable policy of *ancien régime* corporatism. "They firmly shut the doors of plants to non-union labour, monopolised apprenticeships, and stood between the boss and the worker in the negotiation of employment contracts. Traditionally, this brotherhood had been purely professional, with politics strictly excluded." Henri Lambert was thus in direct contact with this particular problem linked to the law of association and its applications. This is all the more so in parliamentary circles began to worry about the problem.