

Belgium: Undocumented workers' hunger strikes reach critical point

Paul Bond
3 September 2008

Recent days have seen an escalation of protests in support of undocumented workers (*sans papiers*) in Belgium. The protests are being stepped up amid fears for the health of around 80 *sans papiers* who have now been on hunger strike for over 50 days.

Sans papiers have occupied several buildings in protest at the government's failure to regularise their status. A hunger strike began at the Béguinage church in Brussels in May. After 56 days, the Ministry of Asylum and Migration offered the 147 Béguinage hunger strikers a compromise deal, granting them a nine-month renewable temporary residence permit and a limited work permit. The Type C work permit is offered to asylum-seekers whose applications have been approved for hearing, and is renewable after one year on evidence of the worker having found a job.

Although hailed as a limited victory by activists, this compromise seems to have heralded a renewed determination on the part of the government not to negotiate with other protesting *sans papiers*. A hunger strike in the occupied church of Saint-Curé d'Ars in Forest was called off at the end of July after 23 days. It was the second such hunger strike undertaken in recent months by the Forest protesters.

Kaba N'Faly, spokesman for the 39 hunger strikers, said on July 26 that they were becoming demoralised and that their actions were no longer effective as the government had broken for the summer recess and gone on holiday. They had been hoping for similar terms to those offered the Béguinage protesters. Instead, they were given renewable temporary leave to remain for three months on medical grounds.

Several hunger strikers also occupied cranes on a Brussels building site. Up to 40 people were involved in the occupation of the six cranes for eight days, which began July 22. They came down on July 30, expressing fears that they would be expelled from the country. A 42-year-old Moroccan striker, weakened by his hunger strike, fell while descending and sustained serious fractures.

Two other hunger strikes, begun at around the same time, have continued, and the condition of the protesters is now causing grave medical concern. On April 7, protesters occupied a building of the Brussels Free University (ULB). Up to 85 people, of some dozen different nationalities, were involved in

the occupation. They began their hunger strike on July 12, demanding the same terms as the Béguinage protesters. Six days earlier a hunger strike began at the nearby Latin American House in Ixelles. *Sans papiers* from five countries are also demanding the Béguinage terms for themselves and 210 colleagues. Both strikes are continuing.

The ULB authorities, which opposed the hunger strike, insisted that hunger strikers in a critical condition must agree to being hospitalised. If this were not accepted, they said, the university would force the removal of the protesters.

Health concerns have been mounting for the strikers. A 25-year-old Moroccan man at ULB was hospitalised after 36 days, having lost consciousness. A 42-year-old man was also taken to hospital, suffering from an intestinal occlusion. An Iranian hunger striker is suffering from diabetes, while two others have already shown renal problems. At the end of last week two women at the Latin American House were taken to hospital to monitor their condition. A pregnant woman, who had been part of the ULB occupation from the outset but was not on hunger strike, was taken to a neighbouring hospital 10 days ago when she went into labour.

Around 70 people continue the ULB hunger strike, with another 11 still refusing food at the Latin American House. Mita Van Obberghen, a doctor attending the ULB site, told the press that she was extremely concerned about medical repercussions, as their state of health could change suddenly. Expressing a hope that the strike would not last as long as the Béguinage protest, she told the press that, for the protesters, "papers are more important than food."

After 50 days of the Latin American House strike, one of the attending doctors wrote a report for Freddy Rosemont, director general of the Office for Foreigners, in which he warned that their condition could deteriorate suddenly from now on. "Their weight loss amounts to at least a quarter of their weight ... kidney failure is our biggest worry... Each day increases the risk for them ... From this point any one of them could suddenly die in front of us."

As one Algerian protester noted late last week, the government had made no response. "Up till now we have received no response, no government visit, despite our ... strike and the weakening state of our health. Are the suffering and

illness of one person not enough for them? Does someone have to die?”

The ULB protesters last week locked themselves into the occupied building, restricting their contact with the outside world. They continue to have contact through the Committee for Action and Support (CAS). The CAS has support from ULB students and the Confederation of Christian Unions (CSC), one of Belgium’s three major trade unions. Jean-Marie Piersotte, former national secretary of the CSC, warned that if nothing were done in the next few hours “there will be a death.”

Piersotte said that he did not understand the actions of the minister for asylum and migration, Annemie Turtelboom.

“Perhaps she thinks these people are bluffing,” said Piersotte. “But they are sacrificing themselves.” Pol van Camp, of the organisation “Right to Migration,” has now begun a hunger strike in solidarity with the Ixelles protesters. Van Camp, denouncing Turtelboom as irresponsible, accused her of trying to see how far she could go before someone died, with no regard for the consequences.

Turtelboom and Roosemont, whose office falls within her ministry, have been bullish in their response. Roosemont flatly refused to negotiate with the crane protesters, calling their actions a form of blackmail. Turtelboom said she would never issue any authorisation under pressure.

In the last week Turtelboom, of the Flemish liberal Open VLD, has been heavily criticised by other senior Belgian politicians. Elio di Rupo, head of the francophone Socialist Party (PS), called her “a young woman who has just come into government and who is wrong.” She must stop, he said, playing the role of “hard aunt from Flanders.”

In response Turtelboom’s spokesman warned against relying on television images as the basis for making policy decisions. Joëlle Milquet, of the francophone Christian Democrat CDH, called for a ruling on the regularisation dossier.

The responses from the other parties highlight the limitations of their support for the *sans papiers*. Di Rupo, for example, talked of his shock at the widely publicised imprisonment of a 19-year-old Ecuadorean student, Rothman Salazar. Salazar, who has lived in Belgium since he was six, is currently mounting a legal challenge to his expulsion. For all Di Rupo’s defence of the student, it was explicitly framed within a refusal to defend all asylum seekers and *sans papiers*: “I know that Belgium cannot accept all the wretched of the world,” he told the papers *Het Laatste Nieuws/La Dernière Heure*.

Milquet was keen to use the delays in finalising the regularisation dossier to criticise the Flemish nationalists in the ruling coalition. It would have serious consequences for the running of the country, she warned, if at each moment they had to sit “with arms crossed” awaiting the decisions of the moderate Flemish nationalists of the NVA. The level of the urgency Milquet is demanding can be seen in her call for a decision on the regularisation dossier to be reached before the government’s declaration on October 14.

As in the recent protests in France, such support looks at resolving disputes on a case-by-case basis. Increasing demands for the promised circular letter, which will standardise the criteria, serve only to legitimise the government’s handling of the asylum process. The government’s main consideration is the escalating economic crisis. Inflation has slowed slightly in the last month after its fastest rises in 24 years. It stands at 5.39 percent. July saw the first rise in unemployment figures for 15 months.

Turtelboom has said that regularising the status of immigrants in work will bring around €10 million into the social security coffers, while regularising the status of those out of work will create a new drain on resources. Under these circumstances the Type C work permit affords the government an opportunity to gauge the costs of any applicant. Milquet has also explicitly connected addressing the regularisation dossier with developing an economic and social plan to stimulate business competition. There are thought to be up to 150,000 *sans papiers* in Belgium.

Limiting the demands to a case-by-case review prevents a defence of the democratic rights of all migrant workers. At the Béguinage church, for example, Father Daniel Alliet called the police to expel protesters after the hunger strike was over. Alliet, widely seen as supportive of the *sans papiers*, called police to remove protesters because of concerns about hygiene conditions. He claimed that action by the protesters at that point would jeopardise the ongoing negotiations with the Office for Foreigners. Some 300 police came to remove 180 protesters.

Alliet has now called for an occupation of the church by Belgian nationals in protest at the handling of the *sans papiers*, saying that Prime Minister Leterme would no longer then be able to consider it “a form of blackmail.” The aim was to express indignation, he said, without showing aggression.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)