

Mass protest strike against austerity staggers new Belgian government

Alex Lantier**8 November 2014**

Workers from across Belgium converged on Brussels on Thursday to protest the austerity measures of the new right-wing government of Prime Minister Charles Michel.

Approximately 130,000 people (100,000 according to police and 200,000 according to the marchers) from both Flemish- and French-speaking regions marched in one of Belgium's largest mass protests since the general strike of 1960-1961. Workers in the chemical, pharmaceutical, transport, public transit, port, steel and aerospace industries struck and joined the protests.

Members of several youth groups and pseudo-left organizations broke into and briefly occupied the headquarters of the Federation of Belgian Corporations (FEB) in Brussels.

Workers were protesting the Michel government's plans to raise the pension age to 67, carry out a 10 percent cut in the public sector wage bill, force long-term unemployed workers to work for their unemployment benefits, cut health spending, and push through a €3 billion wage cut by delaying the indexation of wages on prices. This last measure would cost the average worker €336 (US\$417.27) per year.

The reactionary and provocative attack on the working class comes amid revelations that neighboring Luxembourg, under former Prime Minister and now European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker, offered massive, secret tax breaks to transnational corporations in exchange for basing their activities in Luxembourg.

The Belgian trade union bureaucracy has called a series of rolling strikes in cities across Belgium, leading up to another national strike on December 15.

Violent clashes erupted between police and groups of protesters who broke off the main body of marchers near the Porte du Hal area. Police deployed water

cannon and mounted baton charges against the protesters, who police claimed were dock workers from Antwerp. Several dozen people were wounded, including two policemen who were reportedly seriously injured. At least 30 protesters were arrested.

According to reports in *La Libre*, however, the forces fighting police included two Dutch neo-Nazi activists, Eite Homan and Karl-Jan Walle. They carried materials denouncing the Socialist Party (PS), the largest electoral force in francophone Belgium, which supported Thursday's protest. They were reportedly visiting Brussels for a Flemish nationalist conference that has declared its support for Greece's neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

The mass strike was the first answer by the working class to the installation on October 11 of the Michel government, after months of contentious negotiations following the May 25 federal elections in Belgium. The new government has brought explosive class and national tensions in Belgium—whose governments have traditionally balanced across the Franco-Flemish linguistic divide—to the boil.

The new government is an unstable alliance of Flemish nationalists with free-market francophone politicians. While Michel's free-market Reform Movement (MR) serves as a francophone figurehead for the government, its main force is a coalition of right-wing Flemish parties led by the Flemish-separatist New Flemish Alliance (NVA), which is linked to the far-right Flemish Bloc (VB). The MR received only a quarter of the francophone vote.

This marks the first time in 26 years that the PS is not in government. On the other hand, it is the first time that the anti-European Union (EU) NVA enters into government at the federal level.

The mass strike testifies to the deep opposition that

exists in the working class to the austerity policies pursued by the entire European capitalist class. It comes amid a series of strikes against social cuts across Europe, notably now among German train drivers, and as the French PS government mounts a bloody crackdown against protests over the police murder of ecological activist Rémi Fraisse.

The central problem facing the workers, however, is to take their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and conduct it on the basis of a fight to unify workers of all nationalities in Belgium and Europe against capitalism.

The sharpest warnings must be made about the organizations currently calling and controlling the Belgian protests: the Belgian-francophone PS, its pseudo-left allies, and the union bureaucracy. They aim to maintain their grip on the working class in order to block a revolutionary struggle and in this way impose the cuts demanded by international finance capital.

PS leader and outgoing prime minister Elio di Rupo, marched in the rally and told the British *Daily Telegraph*, “I share the concern of the people, and the measures of the government are unjust.” But Deputy Prime Minister Alexander de Croo mocked di Rupo, pointing to the hypocrisy of his sudden conversion to opposition to social cuts. “Elio is marching with people who were marching against him,” de Croo told *L’Avenir*, referring to the 2011-2014 di Rupo government that imposed billions of euros in cuts against workers. (See: Opposition grows to Belgium austerity)

De Croo added, “We admit, though, there were a lot of people [at the Thursday protest] ... All the relevant ministers will begin to coordinate with the social partners on how to present our measures.”

The trade unions are, as usual, surprised and terrified by the success of their demonstration. “If this government does not back down, we fear that we may not be able to control our forces,” a Christian union leader told *Le Soir*.

The unions are moving quickly to try to negotiate a face-saving agreement that the state can use to try to present its austerity measures to workers in a more favorable light. Even in the run-up to the protests, the government held secret talks with Belgium’s main unions—the SCS, the General Federation of Belgian Workers (FGTB), and the General Confederation of

Free-market Trade Unions (FGSLB)—according to reports in *De Morgen*. At 5 p.m. on Thursday, as the protests continued, the unions met with government negotiators to try to work out plans for a new package of cuts, which it could claim would be more “balanced” between concessions by employers and attacks on the workers.

“We criticized the government’s totally unbalanced program. The government politely listened and finally said that the labor minister would be charged with discreetly and informally contacting all the social partners to prepare future negotiations,” Leemans said.

This would amount to a sell-out of all the strikes currently being mounted by Belgian workers, which is why the right-wing government is eagerly seizing upon the unions’ proposal.

Coming out of the Thursday meeting with the unions, Labor Minister Kris Peeters declared, “Our goal is to see what we can negotiate on. I am tasked with discreetly contacting the unions and the employers’ organizations... We are showing that we are open to social dialog.”

However, Peeters indicated that several government demands were non-negotiable, including demands for a wage freeze.

The unions nonetheless hailed Peeters’ offer to negotiate on these terms, with CSC General Secretary Marie-Hélène Ska praising it as an “initiative to re-establish confidence ... The government seems to be listening to us, we hope that we can have a confident relationship.”



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