

General strike against austerity hits Belgian government

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Workers walked off the job in Belgium yesterday in a powerful strike against the pro-austerity government of Prime Minister Charles Michel that brought the country to a standstill.

Picketing workers blocked access to industrial zones across the country, while Belgium's airports and air space, schools, public administration buildings, and courts were all closed. Hospitals shut down and maintained only a minimum level of emergency services.

The strike shut down all mass transit. National and regional train services stopped, blocking international traffic such as the Eurostar train service to London, and bus lines. Buses and trams did not operate, with the *De Lijn* buses and trams totally shut down in Flanders and only a small number of buses near the border with Luxembourg operating in Belgium's French-speaking Wallonia region.

Strikers set up pickets and blockades on streets and highways in both Flemish- and French-speaking areas. Seventeen pickets largely blocked access to the city of Ghent, whose port was entirely closed. Port and chemical workers in Antwerp also struck, blocking access to one of Europe's principal ports.

Several injuries were reported when drivers tried to force their way through blockades or assaulted strikers. Strikers in Jemappes arrested a driver who hit a picketer while trying to force his way through a blockade, then got out of his car and tried to assault strikers with a baseball bat. Similar assaults injured three strikers in Gerpinnes, two in Herstal, and two in Mons, where two occupants of the vehicle then got out of the car and tried to assault strikers with iron bars, before being arrested.

Strikers also entered the Sart-Tilman scientific research facility to force out a group of researchers who

had arrived at 4:30 am in order to enter the facility before workers set up barricades outside it in the morning.

The strike testifies to overwhelming opposition in the working class to rising social inequality and the Michel government's agenda of social retrogression. The government plans to resolve Belgium's budget crisis entirely on the backs of the workers—cutting public sector staffing levels and labor costs, raising the pension age, and cutting pensions as well as 3 billion euros from state-indexed wage increases. Strikers demanded instead a redistribution of wealth and taxation of the rich.

“We need fairer taxation, I am thinking of a tax on large fortunes. Simply fishing for money in the pockets of working people, this means provoking a return to the Middle Ages, with more and more inequality, and plunging people into deprivation,” Béatrice, a striker in Liège, told *Le Soir*.

The strike was a further blow to the Michel government, after a general strike in November and an ensuing series of regional strikes leading up to yesterday's mobilization. An unstable alliance of Michel's small, free-market francophone Reform Movement (MR) with various right-wing and far-right Flemish parties led by the Flemish-separatist New Flemish Alliance (NVA), which is linked to the far-right Flemish Bloc (VB), it is rapidly being discredited. It has fallen to a 20 percent approval rating in Belgium, and only 12 percent approval in Wallonia.

The far-right, anti-working class character of the Michel government is exemplified by the comments this October of Vice-Prime Minister and Interior Minister Jan Jambon, a top NVA official closely linked to NVA leader Bart de Wever.

Asked about his presence at a 2001 meeting of the

Saint-Maartensfonds, an association that defends World War II-era Flemish volunteers who joined the Nazis' war of aggression against the USSR, he told *La Libre Belgique*, "People who collaborated with the Germans had their reasons. I was not alive at the time." He called Belgian collaboration with the Nazis an "error," but then dismissed the entire matter as a "minor news item."

The central issue facing workers is that their demands can only be won in struggle against capitalism, uniting workers of all nationalities in Belgium and across Europe in a fight to bring down Michel's anti-democratic government and the pro-austerity European Union (EU) in Brussels. These must be replaced by the United Socialist States of Europe, a federation of workers states pursuing socialist policies.

The strike must be taken out of the hands of the Belgian union bureaucracy and political forces like Belgium's francophone Socialist Party (PS), the dominant electoral force in Wallonia, and its pseudo-left allies. Their opposition to the Michel government reflects their electoral and national concerns, not questions of principle; the PS is a reactionary bourgeois party that has repeatedly enforced devastating austerity measures against the Belgian working class in its decades in office.

Staggered by the strength of the strike and its collapse in the polls, the Michel government is desperately seeking to work out a deal with the unions to secure passage of its austerity agenda, knowing that the union leaders are seeking to negotiate an agreement with it.

Asked on Bel-RTL whether his union intended to bring down the government, Marc Goblet, the general secretary of the General Federation of Belgian Labor (FGTB) said this was "absolutely not the case." Praising the reactionary Michel government as "democratically elected," he said: "We are not in that frame of mind."

In an interview with Bel-RTL, NVA leader Bart de Wever stressed that he is also looking for a deal with the unions, so long as it respects the government's budget-cutting, anti-worker priorities. "I would like to sit down at the negotiating table with the trade unions. But certain unions are refusing to speak to the NVA, so it's difficult," he said.

At the same time, de Wever continued to stir up tensions between Flemish and French-speaking

workers, attacking the strike as simply a defense of the PS and the unions. "Everyone knows that the FGTB is the armed wing of the PS. This strike is purely political. In Wallonia, the PS and its armed wing the FGTB want to hold up the democratic majority," de Wever said.

He stressed that the government intended to proceed with austerity measures in defiance of mass popular opposition: "We are in a very bad situation. We must cut 11 billion euros, whether we like it or not. We must do it. We must take measures that are not very agreeable."



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