

Postal workers strike in Belgium

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Postal workers at Belgium Post (BPost) struck for several days last week. The employees walked out in opposition to plans to scrap bonuses for Saturday work and to management's demands for greater flexibility.

The strike prevented mail from being shipped out of the five main depots in Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi and Liège.

According to the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions of Belgium (CSC), the strike began without a ballot during the evening and early hours of October 21 and 22.

There are three trade unions at BPost, with members of all three manning picket lines. According to the CSC General Secretary Andre Blaise, the strike was supported by 90 percent of postal workers.

On Friday no mail, with the exception of a few packages, was delivered anywhere in Belgium. The same day BPost management said they expected the trade unions to defuse tensions so as "to unblock the stalemate this Friday afternoon," reported the Belgian news channel RTBF. However, the CSC said that no negotiations were planned Friday, as management had not announced any meetings.

By Friday evening, the Antwerp and Ghent mail centres were operational as workers returned, with staff at Brussels, Charleroi and Liège still on strike. By Saturday, parcels were being delivered in much of Flanders, but industrial action continued at distribution centres in Brussels and Wallonia. It is expected that mail delays will be in place until at least October 28 due to the backlog.

The strike was a response to the systematic effort by management to drive up productivity and lower the wages of postal workers, intended to prepare the postal services for privatisation.

These plans were publicly announced by management in February of 2011. The "strategic plan 2011-2015" aims at transforming all five of the main mail depots

into international mail centres (IMC), where national, international and regional mail would be sorted. The previous system offloaded regional sorting to 400 local postal workers in smaller regional centres, while the main five depots only dealt with national mail.

On its web site, the company boasts that in September 21, 2015 BPost began delivering groceries in Antwerp from online merchants.

This year, BPost management is on track to implement the final phase of its strategic plan 2011-2015, called "the MSO plan".

Saturday is to become a normal working day, with the loss of two hours pay for all postal workers. This will be replaced by a handout of €240 to Saturday postal workers. Secondly, 15 percent of all postal workers will have to be more flexible. This affects workers on lower tier contracts introduced since 2011, with the collaboration of the trade unions. Thirdly, the plan will upgrade all five mail depots to IMCs.

In 2011, the plan started with the reduction of local mail sorting offices from 400 to 60, leading to job losses of 30 percent. BPost also employed new workers on contracts with worse terms and conditions than the older workforce. These "auxiliary workers" are paid €1,730 euros a month and can be called at short notice to start work or not to come to work. This year the company wants to decrease the notification time to one hour before scheduled work starting.

On February 10, 2011, a strike organised by all the trade unions at BPost protested against the rolling out of the 2011-2015 restructuring plan. Four years on, management is in its final phase to complete the plan.

The old national mail sorting nodes were composed of localised centres that dealt separately with regional, national and international mail. Today robotic machinery is able to sort mail, and transport vehicles are more efficient. In the near future, it is projected that drones will deliver mail to remote locations.

The globalisation of production and services drives populations into a smaller number of cities with increasing numbers of inhabitants. As such, the mail delivery network becomes more concentrated, with fewer but larger nodes. Management puts an increased workload on remaining postal workers, whose productivity and work hours have outpaced any real-term increase in wages since 2008.

The eventual aim is the sell-off of the postal service to the private sector. In January 2006, the Belgian government signed an agreement with Post Danmark and CVC Capital Partners in which those companies took at acquisition of 50 percent minus one share in Belgian Post for €300 million.

CVC Capital Partners is a private US equity firm that manages over US\$52 billion in assets globally. CVC bought its stake in BPost through its investment vehicle, Post Invest Europe Sarl, and went on to make a massive profit through the venture. In 2009, CVC took over Post Danmark, its Danish consortium partner. In 2013, CVC announced it would sell its stake in BPost. According to the postandparcel.info web site, “a stake originally purchased for about EUR 300m in 2005 has now been sold for about EUR 1.4bn.” The site noted, “The company’s work force has been cut from 36,000 to 26,625 in that time.”

In May, *Flanders Today* reported that Alexander De Croo, the federal minister for telecommunications and the postal service, put forward a proposal for the government to sell off its stakes in both BPost and the telecoms operator Proximus.



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