

Belgian workers strike during anti-terror lockdown undermined by trade unions

Ross Mitchell**27 November 2015**

A 24-hour strike November 23 hit the transit authority of the city of Charleroi, Transport en Commun, impacting the metro, buses and mainline railways.

Charleroi transport workers, members of the General Federation of Belgian Workers (FGTB) and the Christian Trade Union Confederation (CSC), went on strike despite a terror threat level of three imposed by the government on the whole country. Emergency measures locking down the capital, Brussels, and all its 19 boroughs, were in place following the terror attacks in Paris.

The strike affected public transport services in the main towns of the Hainaut region, Charleroi and Namur. Rail lines between Anvers and Charleroi were affected, disrupting rail service in Flanders. The walkout won overwhelming public support, since workers wanted to fight the planned public transport cuts made by the current austerity government of Prime Minister Charles Michel.

The government has increased the budgets of all security forces, while essential public services face severe cuts. In October, the government decreed a new tax-shift regime, which shifts the burden of taxation from incomes to indirect taxes on essential goods and services.

The trade unions kept the rail strike within regional limits, blocking it from spreading along the whole network of the national railway system, Societe Nationale des Chemins de Fer Belges (SNCB).

On the morning of the strike, the unions cancelled a campaign by workers to mobilise political support and inform other workers of the nature of their action.

The unions cancelled a distribution of leaflets to the population in the Hainaut province the same morning. A leaflet had been prepared to inform workers and

youth about the planned budget cuts facing public transport workers and was to be distributed at three roundabouts in Tournai, three others in Mouscron and one in the working-class suburb of Ghislenghien.

Since 1979, all Belgian trade unions have agreed to government laws dividing collective labour bargaining between the three main regions of Belgium: Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels. This pits workers against each other, region by region.

The train drivers union did not strike nationally, but only in Hainaut, undermining the struggle of the striking rail workers in Charleroi. The head of the union, Vincent Pestiaux, said, "As the SNCB is a company operating nationally, there will be trains passing through [the area on strike] Charleroi."

Jean Peeters, regional secretary of the FGTB, said in a press conference, "As a consequence of these heinous crimes carried out last week in Paris, and as a consequence of the raising of the level of terrorist threats (level four in Brussels, level three in the rest of Belgium), we decided in a united common front and after negotiations with the police to stop our planned actions to inform the population. Social tensions are already high enough. It does not augur well and there were risks to our trade union representatives. People are tense. These actions are postponed, as long as the threat level remains at 3, and have not yet been planned out."

In reality, social tensions did not lead to attacks on strikers, but rather the setting up of spontaneous picket lines, without trade union approval. These took place at the Valeo and Husqvarna companies in Ghislenghien and at the Drafil works in Mouscron on the morning of the 23rd in solidarity with public transport workers.



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