

Belgian rail unions cancel mandated strike action

Ross Mitchell
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January saw the Belgian trade unions cancel planned anti-austerity strikes by railway workers. After having organised a 48-hour strike action which successfully shut down the Belgian rail network January 6-7, the unions wound up three others days of planned actions.

The climb-down came against the vote of rail workers, and despite the support of the most vulnerable sections of society, students, youth and elderly, whose fares discounts will be hit by the new austerity plan.

After having called on Employment and Economy Minister Kris Peeters to act as a mediator in the dispute, the trade unions got their feet under the table of negotiations with management and decided to cancel all remaining planned strike action.

“There is a framework and a schedule,” said Luc Piens of the Flemish wing of the ACV Transcom trade union. “We are talking and thus we are making progress.”

The president of the train drivers union CGSP, M. Abdissi, said, “It is clear now that we are not mentioning strikes any more.”

Peters tweeted, “No strikes. To talk to each other around a table of negotiations is the only way to make progress.”

In December 2015, management of the Belgian rail company SNCB had threatened to cut off financing of the railway trade unions if strikes went ahead. Last year Belgian rail trade unions received €10 million from the railway bosses. During strikes, trade union representatives are paid from this fund.

The current financing agreement between management and unions ended last December and is normally renegotiated at the start of every year.

The Flemish publisher Mediahuis reported, “Without progress in the negotiations, the trade unions could well be without money in January 2016.”

The cuts directed against railworkers and passengers are part of the productivity plan for 2016-2018 devised by the government of Prime Minister Charles Michel. It aims at cutting the budget of the SNCB by 20 percent (€3 billion), through 7,000 job cuts, on top of the 7,000 jobs already destroyed with the collaboration of the trade unions over the past decade.

The plan aims to increase productivity by 20 percent by 2019, to help make the Belgian rail network ripe for privatisation. The rail network is one of the best in Europe, while fares are far cheaper than in Britain, where the railways have been fully privatised. Private owners who took over the Belgian rails can be expected to raise fares significantly to make huge profits.

At the end of the 1990s, the rail trade unions agreed to put rail workers on a reduced 36-hour work week, with decreased statutory holidays, without a pay rise, and an increase of accrued days in return for working over their hours. Because of a lower number of workers manning the railway, workers keep accumulating accrued days without being able to redeem them for days off, as there is no one to cover for them.

In 1990 there were 45,000 rail workers transporting 130 million passengers. In 2014, there were just 33,000 workers transporting 235 million passengers.

The plan aims at deepening the division of railway workers, as in all public-private partnerships across Europe. The Belgian rail infrastructure is operated by InfraBel, dealing with tracks and maintenance; operating train crews and station staff are under the current SNCB which will be hived off. The SNCB human resource department HRRail will be replaced by a private recruitment agency to increase the rate of casualisation of the workforce and undermine existing contracts and working conditions.

The plan aims at shutting down all non-profitable

regional routes and puts the focus on the main inter-city rail routes.



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