

Belgian air traffic controllers launch wildcat strike at Brussels airport

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Air traffic controllers at Brussels Airport, Belgium's main aviation hub, struck in unofficial wildcat action for a second day on Wednesday. They are protesting plans of air traffic agency Belgocontrol to raise their pension age from 55 to 58.

The strike, involving around 80 controllers, began 5pm Tuesday and led to the delay and cancellation of dozens of flights. For about an hour Tuesday evening, all take-offs and landings were cancelled. Hundreds of flights were cancelled on Wednesday. At one point, just 15 planes per hour were able to take off.

The strike also affected operations at Ryanair's Belgian base south of Brussels in Charleroi Airport.

The strike began after representatives of a number of trade unions came to an agreement with management to ensure that the increase in retirement age is phased in. Negotiations had been taking place since mid-March. In response to the agreement, anger mounted among members of one of the Guild of Air Traffic Controllers (BGATC), with many reporting in sick.

The move by workers to defend their pension rights has been met with furious denunciations from the employers, government and the media. The strike began just nine days after Brussels Airport, one of Europe's busiest, reopened on April 3 under conditions of a security lockdown. The airport was closed on March 22 after bombs detonated by two terrorists destroyed the departure hall, killing 10 people.

About an hour later, a suicide bomber attacked the Brussels subway at the end of rush hour, bringing the death toll to 31.

Large parts of the Brussels metropolitan area have been under a security clampdown since last November 13, with the authorities utilising the terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members in Paris to implement anti-democratic

measures. This included the raising of the Belgian state's threat level to its highest, four.

Speaking on behalf of his pro-austerity government, Prime Minister Charles Michel said Wednesday, "It's a wildcat strike. It is totally unacceptable. This is an irresponsible strike. I do not accept that a handful [of people] decides to take the country hostage, to put our image and our economic situation in danger."

Michel described the Brussels airport as "the vital economic lungs of the country's economy" and said the government "will not be blackmailed." He also threatened doctors who issued sickness certificates to air traffic controllers with reprisals. "According to me, they ought to be punished, this is a clear message for doctors," he warned.

Michel cited the March terrorist attacks to demonise the strikers, stating that the country "had lived through difficult times... We have worked with a lot of effort to try to put the airport back into full working order again. I would like that one stops from sawing the branch on which we all are sitting."

The two government ministers who have been involved in the negotiations, Kris Peeters (deputy prime minister and minister for employment, economy and consumers) and Jacqueline Galant (minister of transport, responsible for Belgocontrol) said that there was no change in the government's stance on the workers' pensions. They demanded the end of the strike to "enable resumption of full traffic flow."

These attacks gave the signal for savage denunciations of the strikers by employers' organisations and the media. Belgium's main French-language daily *Le Soir* denounced the workers as akin to terrorists, writing, "This country no longer needs terrorists to blow it up. It's doing it all on its own, with its absurdities, its lack of responsibility, its going off in

all directions, its pantomimes. Have we lost our sense of reality?”

Tony Tyler, the CEO of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), representing the global airline industry, said the strike “is a kick in the teeth for all the airline and airport staff who have worked so hard to reconnect Brussels to the world after the appalling terrorist attack just three weeks ago. It is the height of irresponsibility to cut a vital service and doing so without warning can only be seen as malicious.”

Tyler all but called for a strike-breaking operation to end not only the present dispute but also any future action, stating, “If we cannot count on simple human decency from such highly-compensated professionals then it’s time for governments to find ways to guarantee the availability of air traffic control services.”

The president of the Brussels airport, Marc Descheemaeker, said Wednesday, “This action calls for revenge” and threatened that “measures” could be taken against striking controllers.

Irish budget airline Ryanair announced Wednesday that it would seek to sue strikers for damages.

The unofficial action by the air traffic controllers is a rebellion by workers against the trade unions as much as it is a defiant and determined stance against the employers’ attacks on their pension rights. The Belgian state has been reliant on the trade unions to head off large-scale protests against austerity, which forced the staging of a December 2014 general strike. Michel publically thanked the other airline unions such as the SFLP for not backing the air traffic controllers.

The Guild of Air Traffic Controllers has not lifted a finger in defence of its members. Rather, it is doing all it can to end the dispute and has called on the air traffic controllers to return to work. The Guild denied reports that it instigated workers calling in sick on Tuesday and announced, “As a professional, and not as a trade union organisation, the Guild is not a trade union partner of Belgocontrol and cannot participate in the negotiations. In no case has the guild organised, mobilised or called on its members to start this strike action.”

The strike proves that workers are determined to fight and will not be intimidated by the attacks on their conditions and democratic rights. It follows strikes by controllers in Greece last week (also over attacks on pension rights) and by French controllers who staged a

36-hour strike beginning March 31 to protest job losses and the attacks by the Socialist Party government of Francois Hollande. The movement against the Socialist Party government has escalated in recent weeks, leading to last week’s massive nationwide demonstrations against its anti-worker labour law proposals. The protests on March 31 involved more than a million people nationally.

It is imperative that the working class throughout Belgium and Europe come to the defense of the striking air traffic controllers, who will be subject to an intensifying campaign of vilification and threats from the combined forces of the state, the media and the trade unions. Their courageous action in defense of pensions and retirement must be connected to a struggle to unite the entire working class against social inequality and police-state methods of rule.



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