

Brussels air traffic controllers restart work amid growing scandal over March 22 attacks

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Air traffic controllers at Brussels' Zaventem airport, who mounted a sick-out on Tuesday night and Wednesday shutting down air traffic over Belgium, returned to work yesterday. Belgocontrol, the Belgian air security authority, indicated that no workers had called in sick, unlike Wednesday when the action forced the cancellation of 400 flights.

Trade unions are continuing to negotiate with Belgocontrol and the government on the reactionary contract proposal, which includes increasing the retirement age three years to 58 and hiring 30 more controllers by the beginning of next year.

The Belgian Guild of Air Traffic Controllers (BGATC), a minority union that criticized the contract negotiated by the state and public sector unions, did not respond to WSWs requests for comment.

After reports indicated that one of its officials had said the guild would support a sick-out, the BGATC aggressively distanced itself on Wednesday from the action against the contract, trying to isolate its members. It issued a statement declaring, "In no case has the guild organised, mobilised or called on its members to start this strike action."

This is entirely in keeping with the anti-worker role of the Belgian trade unions, which have sought to strangle workers' opposition to the right-wing, pro-austerity government of Prime Minister Charles Michel, and keep strike action within the well-worn channels of symbolic one-day protests.

The unions did not reply to Michel's incendiary charges, exploiting the tragedy of the March 22 bombing at Zaventem airport and the Brussels metro by Islamist fighters linked to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militia. The prime minister said that in this context, the strike was "totally unacceptable" and that strikers aimed to "take the country hostage, to put our image and our economic situation in danger."

These comments were echoed by Philippe Lamberts, a Green Member of the European Parliament representing Brussels. He denounced the strikers for a "total lack of consideration," adding, "They have basically taken the major airport in the country hostage."

These are reactionary slanders aiming to brand workers' defense of wages and conditions as essentially terrorist activity, while distracting public attention from rising revelations of the Belgian government's role in the run-up to the March 22 attacks.

Political responsibility for the attacks lies not with strikers but with the NATO powers, which built up a vast cadre of Islamist terror fighters during their reactionary proxy war in Syria. The terrorists had been identified to the Belgian authorities, as well as the fact that there would be attacks on Zaventem airport and the Brussels subway, and that these attacks were imminent. Nonetheless, nothing was done, apparently because the Islamist network developed in Brussels was too vast for Belgian intelligence agencies to effectively monitor.

Earlier this month, police stationed at Zaventem airport circulated an open letter stating that repeated warnings about security lapses at the airport had been ignored. They threatened strike action that was reportedly narrowly averted by last-minute negotiations.

The escalating fighting inside the state machine over who will take the blame for a stunning security lapse that cost 31 lives is increasingly claiming the heads of top officials. Yesterday, the president of the Belgian federal transport authority, Laurent Ledoux, resigned and bitterly attacked Transport Minister Jacqueline Galant, saying her conduct was "worthy of the Gestapo" for having asked him to name and denounce other Belgian transport officials.

Galant, who responded by pledging a "psycho-social inquiry" into the well-being of her ministry's staff, also faced charges that she lied to the Belgian parliament when

she claimed that she had never received any requests to beef up security at Belgian airports.

Yesterday, letters addressed to Galant leaked to the press, in which Ledoux called for a vast increase in spending on security. The contents of these letters again point to the responsibility of the close collaboration between the Belgian and NATO foreign policy and security establishment with the Islamist terrorist groups in the March 22 attacks.

In one remarkable passage noted without comment by *Le Soir*, Ledoux writes, “One can enter into the airport as if it were a windmill, well-known jihadists walk around there with access badges.”

In this letter dated December 15, 2014, Ledoux added, “For years, there have been serious gaps in Belgium on airport security. ... We will probably have to review the organization of the aerial security inspection service and recruit qualified personnel (which we do not have internally), or hire consultants. Given our current budgetary limitations, we will need the full support of the cabinet to carry out this task.”

If the security services are so thoroughly penetrated by Al Qaeda that they allow Islamist terrorists to wander around the Brussels airport, however, it is unclear what purpose would be served by slashing workers’ living standards to hand over hundreds of millions of euros more to them.

Michel was forced to defend his transport minister in a session of parliament yesterday, in which he lamely asserted that he wanted “full transparency” on the issue.

The attempts of the Belgian bourgeois parties, both in government and in opposition, to discredit strikers by citing the March 22 attacks should be rejected with contempt. The reactionary contract prepared by the government and the unions to the air traffic controllers, the sell-out of workers’ action, and the March 22 attacks themselves all testify to the utterly reactionary character of the Michel government and its NATO allies.



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