

Belgian prison wardens strike met with government repression

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A nationwide strike of Belgian prison wardens enters its first month this week.

The strike is against the austerity measures being imposed by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Charles Michel against public sector workers. For this reason, a group normally treated with respect by the ruling class as administrators of its repressive state apparatus is now being subjected to brutal attacks.

The government plans to shrink the public sector by 20 percent, with pay and staffing being cut by 10 percent by 2020 overall. It aims at cutting staffing of prisons by 10 percent while making prison wardens work 12 months for 11 months' pay. The cuts will reduce substantially what prison services can offer inmates in education, as part of their rehabilitation. Affected services include mental health care, apprenticeships, online learning, and arts activities.

The Belgium prison system is notoriously decrepit. The Forest-Berkaendel prison in Walloon was built in 1910 and 360 inmates currently live in a space designed for 280. A striking warden at the prison told the media that with the cuts, "What is removed from the prisoners is their chance to reintegrate society as a human being, their chance to have a job after doing their time, and their chance to remain a human being in the prison system."

The cuts to the prison service will further dehumanise prisons. They will lead to increases in cell occupancy alongside the overcrowding of prisons with less wardens able to attend each prisoner. This creates more stress on both prisoners and guards, which produces a vicious circle of violence and repression.

On May 18, one inmate died in the psychiatric ward at the Lantin prison, as a result of a fight with plastic forks between inmates who are kept 22 hours a day in their cells. Lantin, in the Juprelle borough in the Liege

district, holds 900 inmates.

According to the Belgian Human Rights League, prisons in Belgium, with 129 detainees to every 100 spaces, are more overcrowded than any in European country except Hungary. President Alexis Deswaef told the BBC the situation was "a complete violation of article three of the European Convention of Human Rights," which prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment.

In an attempt to force the wardens back to work, when the fire sprinkler system broke at Lantin the mayor of Juprelle, Christine Servaes, took the decision to call in the police and military to operate the prison. Servaes said, "Fire safety equipment is failing so I am calling upon the use of emergency decree."

The living conditions of the prisoners under the new regime are reported as appalling. On May 19, in St. Gilles prison in Brussels, 700 striking prison workers held a demonstration. Riot police barred access to the prison and manned the prison. Water cannons were used against the strikers, who clashed with the riot police.

Nationwide, basic prison services were lacking for the first 17 days of the strike. On the 18th day, May 13, the government started to use the military to break picket lines and man prisons with prison directors, managers and police.

On May 17, the building of the Justice Ministry in the capital Brussels, headed by Koen Geens, was occupied during the morning by striking prison workers. Trade union representatives opposed this, calling for "peace and quiet so as not to jeopardise negotiations."

Trade unions representatives of the main prison union federations—the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC) and General Union of Public Service (CGSP)—convened to meet the minister informally at

the Justice Ministry. Striking prison workers demonstrating outside rammed through the main heavy entrance double doors and went upstairs to the justice minister's office, shouting, "Together, Together!" and "We will not kowtow."

Riot police were called in, leading to fighting inside the building with police using pepper spray and batons.

Michel Jacobs, a CGSP trade union representative, attempted to defuse the situation. Once back outside the building he said on national TV, "I did not have time to see much. I got hit by police batons and punches. Oh well! It does not matter. I am not dead. Now I am strongly calling out for a peaceful standing down of the strikers. This I want to make it clear. I hope that everyone now is going back to their prisons and we are going to think about the next step."

Laurence Clamart, a permanent secretary of the CSC, concurred saying, "First of all, let me make it clear that the CSC trade union does not approve, does not sanction these actions taken by striking trade union members."

Last Monday, a Forest prison striker said, "We are going all the way. Someone must kowtow and it will not be us. It will be the government."

He added, "We have families and these cuts will take out one month's salary from our yearly pay."

The government is opposed to any compromise. Geens has repeatedly stressed that the prison Rationalisation Plan will go ahead. In this, the trade unions are on his side, as the plan began to be implemented with their collaboration a year ago, region by region.

Gino Hope, a representative of the Flemish trade union ACOD-CGSP, said last week, "I respect the struggle of my Walloon colleagues. But they must also respect the needs of their Flemish colleagues. The Rationalisation Plan started last summer. We struck against the plan in some prisons in Flanders. To no avail. Bruges prison struck for two weeks against the cuts last summer. To no avail. So we chose to go along with the plan. I am not saying that it is working well, 100 percent, but we are starting to get accustomed to it."

In December last year, the trade unions stopped a strike against the austerity plan in the prisons of Walloon, except in Mons where a determined workforce balloted for the strike to continue.

At the same time, the magistrate service is undergoing a cull, with 245 magistrates to be cut by 2020. This will lead to a saving of around €23 million in salaries. Some 700 jobs are going among personnel working within magistrates' courts, including clerks and secretaries. A 7 percent cut is being made to the number of trainee magistrates and a 10 percent cut to non-magistrate personnel. Non-magistrate personnel on non-permanent contracts will be cut by 9.3 percent.

Belgium spent just €81 per inhabitant in its justice system in 2012. In the Netherlands €125 was spent, in Germany €114 and in Luxembourg and Switzerland €147 and €198 respectively. Such is the scale of cuts that a magistrate's verdict, in favour of prison inmates who sued the government for failing to meet their human rights during the strike, cannot be enacted. The verdict compels the government to pay inmates compensation of €200 to €10,000 a month. One magistrate commented regarding the case, "The rule of law cannot be applied evenly in Belgium today."



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