

Strike wave against austerity spreads in France, Belgium

Kumaran Ira
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As strikes and occupations continue in France against the reactionary labor law imposed earlier this month by the Socialist Party (PS) government, despite attacks on strikers by riot police, protests and walkouts against austerity are breaking out in neighboring Belgium. On Tuesday, some 60,000 workers marched in Brussels against the austerity measures of the conservative government of Prime Minister Charles Michel.

The Brussels demonstration targeted planned cuts to the welfare system, budget cuts in public service and education, and a labor reform allowing bosses to introduce a 45-hour work week and impose overtime without extra pay.

Prior to Tuesday's protest, the Michel government reinforced draconian security measures imposed after the March 22 terrorist attack in Brussels. It is now clear that the Belgian government, which ignored forewarnings from foreign intelligence agencies concerning the identity and plans of the March 22 attackers, is using the security measures to repress domestic opposition from the working class. Riot police used water cannon and tear gas against Tuesday's protest, injuring several people. Ten people were reportedly arrested.

The growing movement against austerity in Belgium coincides with an escalating wave of strikes in France. The regressive PS labor law allows companies to negotiate with trade unions to lengthen the work week up to a maximum of 46 hours and to cut wages. It also eases the conditions for laying off workers. The law, overwhelmingly opposed by workers and youth, is widely seen as an illegitimate attack on workers' social rights won through decades of struggle.

In France, strikes are occurring at oil refineries and ports and in civil aviation, rail, energy, transport and construction. Nationwide protests will take place today,

after thousands of people participated in protest on May 19.

A week-long oil strike is paralyzing the French economy and causing widespread fuel shortages. Thirty percent of France's 12,000 gas stations are reportedly out of fuel or close to it.

The PS government has responded by hypocritically denouncing protesting workers. Prime Minister Manuel Valls said that "democracy is being taken hostage by a minority."

This is a brazen and provocative lie. It is the PS government that is behaving like a dictatorship, pushing through the socially regressive law without a parliamentary vote in the face of overwhelming popular opposition, employing the emergency powers provisions of the anti-democratic Article 49.3 of the French Constitution to do so.

A large majority of the population holds President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls responsible for the social tensions and the industrial disruptions caused by the strikes. An Elabe survey published yesterday found that nearly 70 percent of the population support having the PS, and not the strikers, back down by withdrawing the labour law.

The strikes are undermining the PS government, triggering a deep crisis and calls for withdrawing the law, even from within the PS itself. Bruno Le Roux, head of the PS faction in the National Assembly, called on the government to rework the labor law. He particularly singled out Article 2, which allows the trade unions to sign and implement contracts violating the Labor Code and the requirement for industry-wide agreements.

Valls opposed this proposal in the parliament, claiming that there would be "neither a withdrawal of the law nor questioning of Article 2, as it is the heart of

the philosophy of the bill.”

Instead, the PS government is determined to use police repression to crush strikes and blockades by oil workers.

After sending riot police on Tuesday to attack workers blockading the oil refinery at Fos-sur-Mer near Marseille, police intervened yesterday to reestablish access to a key fuel depot at Douchy-les-Mines near Valenciennes in northern France. The depot had been blocked by members of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and Solidaires unions since May 19.

The attack on Tuesday began around 5 a.m., as 20 police trucks converged on the refinery and riot police used water cannon to dislodge 80 workers who were blocking access.

Despite the police repression, strikes are spreading throughout France’s oil facilities. The country’s eight refineries are all affected by strike action. The Total refinery at Feyzin near Lyon and Total’s Normandy plant have stopped production. The Grandpuits facility near Paris will soon come to a complete halt and Donges, close to Nantes, will shut down several units, while La Mède of Fos-sur-Mer and Lavéra in the Marseille region are working at a reduced rate. Dozens of oil depots, out of a total of 78 in France, are also blocked.

With fuel shortages worsening, the government has begun releasing portions of its strategic fuel reserves. Francis Duseux, president of the French oil industry group UFIP (Union Française des Industries Petrolières), told RMC radio: “Over the last two days, since we had problems with the refining operations and blockades of fuel depots, we began, together with the public authorities, to use the reserve stocks.”

Terrified by the protests, ruling circles are calling for the government to trample on the constitutionally protected right to strike and force employees back to work. The right-wing opposition Republicans (LR) asked the PS to requisition oil workers and legally compel them to return to work. MP Eric Ciotti said, “We must requisition them, as [conservative President] Nicolas Sarkozy did in 2010. It is in the national interest. We cannot leave the country blockaded by a small minority.”

In the meantime, strikes are erupting in other French industries against the labor law. The CGT-Energy federation has called for strike action at the French state

electricity company EDF and is planning site blockades to cut electricity production. This would lead to power cuts across the country. Yesterday, workers at France’s 19 nuclear plants, including Nogent-sur-Seine southeast of Paris and Gravelines in the north, voted to go out on strike on Thursday.

Unions at the French National Railway (SNCF) called strikes for yesterday and today, and the CGT issued a notice of strike action, renewable daily, starting from May 31. Indefinite strike action has been called at Paris transport system (RATP) against the PS labour law and poor working conditions and wages, starting from June 2.

Airport workers, including air traffic controllers, administrative staff, engineers and technicians are on strike today, causing the cancellation of flights at several airports. A nationwide strike is planned between June 2 and June 5 involving air traffic controllers and civil aviation workers to protest against the labor law and the drop in staff numbers.

Port and dock workers are also entering into struggle, with dockers at Marseille and Le Havre, which handles 40 percent of French imports, voting to strike until Friday to protest police repression on Tuesday at the Fos-sur-Mer oil facility.

Since Monday, Marseille dockers have refused to unload goods, including crude and refined petroleum products, headed to refineries. Some 29 ships carrying crude oil were still stranded yesterday as the CGT called a work stoppage until Friday at the public Marseille port facilities as well as at Fluxel, the private operator that manages two oil terminals.



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