

Rail strike hits Belgium

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Rail workers in Belgium's French-speaking region of Wallonia began an indefinite strike Wednesday evening. Yesterday, it brought the southern part of the country to a standstill, also impacting Flanders, and creating large traffic jams in the capital, Brussels.

The workers are protesting plans by the state-run SNCB railroad company to undermine the 36-hour workweek. Management is attempting to reduce compensation for overtime worked by the 34,000 rail workers. Normally, employees receive time off corresponding to extra time worked.

The strike was brought forward from its previously scheduled date of May 31 by the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions and the General Federation of Belgian Labour in an effort to keep the growing anger of the workers under their control.

The strike followed Tuesday's 60,000-strong demonstration in Brussels against the pro-austerity government of Prime Minister Charles Michel, which is attempting to impose cuts to the welfare system, budget cuts in public service and education, and a labour reform allowing companies to introduce a 45-hour workweek and impose overtime without extra pay.

A further mass protest and strikes, mainly in the public sector, are scheduled for May 31. Another protest is set for June 24.

Over the last year, with the collaboration of the trade unions, Employment Minister Kris Peteers has been rolling out a labour law that drastically undermines workers' social rights. The aim of the government is to reverse social gains made by the working class in the postwar period.

The law imposes a workweek of 45 to 50 hours, and 9-to-11-hour working days. Employees can be notified of work schedules by bosses with just 24 hours' notice. It enforces an increase in weekend and night working. Working hours are averaged over a year of work, allowing overtime work without overtime pay. It

introduces a yearly maximum quota of overtime work employers can impose on workers, while not having to pay them in cash.

The retirement age has also been increased from 60 to 67 in the private and public sectors.

These attacks meet the demands of capital for workers to be available on demand depending on the market fluctuations for goods and services.

Due to the connivance of the trade unions, which only demand a greater role in implementing the cuts demanded by capital, 1 million workers have already been toiling under the Peteers laws for the past year.

In October 2015, the Belgian trade union federation, consisting of the FGTB, CSC and CSSLB union bodies, declared it will challenge one of the main austerity measures, ending the pegging of pensions and wages to inflation of the government, through legal means only. This move was in opposition to any mobilisation of workers nationwide and a mechanism to quell growing opposition in the working class to the government's attacks.

Prime Minister Charles Michel told news channels Wednesday he was willing to negotiate with the unions as long as the law is implemented.



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