

Belgian public sector goes on strike in run-up to French rail walkout

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Public sector workers in Belgium organised in a 24-hour national strike Tuesday, as French rail workers began indefinite strike action yesterday evening. Workers are mobilising across national borders in Europe against the reactionary austerity policies that the entire European Union (EU) has imposed on workers since the 2008 financial crisis.

While French workers are mobilising in struggle against the Socialist Party's (PS) regressive labour law, the right-wing government of Belgian prime minister Charles Michel intends to impose welfare cuts and budget cuts in public service and education as well as to raise the pension age. The Belgian government's aim is to make it easier for employers to hire part-time workers on short-term, part-time contracts with less security. Its proposed laws introduce a 45-hour workweek and impose overtime without extra pay.

The Belgian strike was called by several trade unions, including the General Confederation for Public Services (CGSP); it coincided with a train drivers stoppage that entering its sixth day. Belgian train drivers are opposing cuts in overtime pay.

The whole Belgian public sector was heavily disrupted due to strike action taken by workers in the health sector, public transport, postal services, fire service, education and other areas. Operations of the state-run SNCB (National Railway Company of Belgium) were paralysed in the Francophone areas, while in Flanders only 50 percent of trains were servicing their lines. Some services to Paris and German cities were delayed or cancelled.

Mainline trains and buses in Brussels and the French-speaking region of Wallonia were paralysed. In the capital, Brussels, metro lines, trams and buses were affected for the second time in a week, while rubbish went uncollected.

In other towns and cities, metro and tram networks were also halted. In Charleroi, a city with a long history of working class struggle dating back more than a century and a half, workers voted not to allow trains, buses or trams to run.

At 9 a.m., striking workers gathered to demonstrate in Brussels, after a protest of at least 60,000 people in that city on May 24. The Confederation of Christian Trade Unions claimed 12,000 marched in Brussels. A self-made banner floating along the marching crowds in Brussels read, "No more of our sacrifices for your privileges." Others read, "Fighting for our rights."

Other marches took place nationwide with 1,000 protesting in Ghent, 350 in Namur, 400 in Wavre and 1,500 in Mons. Wavre is the location of Prime Minister Michel's residence. During the strike, it was protected by a heavy security and police cordon.

On Monday, three Flemish unions and one Francophone union reached agreement with Belgium's justice minister, Koen Geens, in an attempt to end a five-week strike of prison officers. Geens pledged Monday to hire more prison officers, after which the unions ended their participation in the strike. Two other unions are yet to settle.

Commenting on the duration of the rail strike, the *Le Soir* newspaper commented, "This is unseen since the last general strike of 1986."

While the ruling elite is deeply concerned at the escalating militancy in the working class internationally, and in particular in both Belgium and France, it is also well aware that the trade union bureaucracy is an ally against the workers.

The Belgian trade unions called on their members sector by sector to participate in the strike. They did not issue a call to mobilise workers across the whole public sector. Teachers were allowed to strike, but the Belgian

teachers union did not mobilise its members. Trade unions in the airport industry did not call on their members to join the general strike, though workers joined the movement on an individual basis without affecting business operations. Airports in Brussels and in the country were not affected by the strike.

Le Soir cited the comments of journalist Bernard Demonty, who stated, “Not a single trade union movement made any government step down from power” in Belgian history. The article continues, “To make the government fall [Demonty says], one needs a general strike to the end. This cannot be so, for the trade unions are divided and not determined for it.”

In France, rail workers will be joined by airline workers and pilots on strike in the coming days. At the same time, six of the country’s eight oil refineries remain on strike, with 20 percent of French gas stations running out of gas. Refuse workers have launched strikes and blockades of facilities in Paris and St. Etienne.

Pilots from France’s National Union of Airline Pilots (SNPL) voted for long-term strike action on Monday, as they face a substantial pay cut after the SNPL sold out their strike at the end of 2014.

French officials tried to minimise the scope of the strike, with Transport Minister Alain Vidalies declaring, “Of course the movement will be serious, but it won’t have the scope one might expect.” Nonetheless, the rail strike clearly will have a significant impact, shutting down most lines on Paris’s express regional transit system as well as many long-distance high-speed trains and intercity trains.

Large sections of the French trade union bureaucracy are hostile to the strike. The pro-Socialist Party (PS) French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) cancelled its strike call yesterday, on the pretext that the François Hollande government had made concessions.

In the meantime, ruling circles in France are trying to whip up hysteria and public anger against the strikers. The most virulent comments came from Pierre Gattaz (CEO of Radiall), the leader of the Movement of French Enterprises (Medef), the largest employer federation, who denounced strikers as “terrorists.”

Gattaz said, “Making people respect the rule of law means ensuring that minorities that behave like hoodlums, like terrorists, will not blockade the entire country. ... When the [General Confederation of

Labour, CGT] prevents newspapers from appearing because they refused to publish [CGT General Secretary Philippe] Martinez’s tract, it seems to me we are in a Stalinist dictatorship.”



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