

Belgian unions try to suppress country's growing strike wave

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Ever broader sections of Belgian workers and students are reacting with anger to the right-wing government's austerity programme. In response, the trade unions are doing everything possible to isolate and end the numerous strikes and protests that are breaking out.

A central concern of the unions in the sabotaging of workers struggles in Belgium is the movement taking place just over the border in France against the austerity and reactionary labour laws imposed by the Socialist Party government of President Francois Hollande. For the nationalist union bureaucracies in both countries, the possibility of a joint struggle by Belgian and French workers is seen as a mortal threat to the capitalist system which they defend.

On election in 2014, Prime Minister Charles Michel's right-wing government outlined an agenda of cutting welfare and public services. It proposed raising the pension age, with an increase in the minimum number of years worked before pension entitlement. Pensions and pay rises for public sector workers would no longer be pegged to inflation and retiring workers would not be replaced. The government also intends to make it easier for employers to hire workers on short-term, part-time contracts.

Responding to workers' anger over the Michel government's austerity program, the unions organised 15 demonstrations across Belgium, each involving around 100,000 protesters, in 2014-15. In October 2015, the trade union federation launched a legal challenge to ending the link between pensions and wages and inflation, restricting all activity to the courts and preventing any mobilisation by the working class.

Employment Minister Kris Peeters responded by rolling out a labour law to undermine working conditions and social gains. This extends the working

week to 45 hours, with 9-11 hour working days, allowing employers to give workers just 24 hours' notice of work schedules. Weekend and night working will be increased, while averaging working hours over a year allows for the imposition of overtime work without additional pay.

Last month train drivers on the national railway SNCB began wildcat strike action. HR Rail is seeking to scrap compensation days for periods of illness or holiday and is pushing an increased productivity deal. The strike predominantly affected the French-speaking south of the country, although workers from the Flemish union ACOD in the north were also involved.

The Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC/ACV) and General Federation of Belgian Labour (ABVV/FGTB) are now discussing a negotiation period for the productivity arrangement after the strike was wound up on June 3. The francophone union, General Confederation for Public Services (CGSP), along with the CSC Transcom and ACOD unions, instructed their members to return to work last week. The Christian rail union stated that they had never called for action in the first place.

The CGSP had announced an official week-long action beginning yesterday, June 12. The threat was later raised of extending this to the following week (19-26 June). However, on Thursday June 9, CGSP drivers' negotiator Serge Piteljon told the press, "*We must protect our members but at the present stage we are not effectively planning for a fortnight of strikes.*" The next day, the union told its members not to strike as planned—"for the time being." It announced it had drafted a list of proposals for negotiation. Michel Abdissi of the CGSP called this "a final olive branch" to management, saying the union hoped "this gesture will be appreciated."

Days earlier Abdissi had admitted, “Each time we make a concession they keep asking for more.”

The strike notice remains in place for both weeks, but any official strike is unlikely before June 19.

Ludo Sempels of ACOD said that he was “taking note” of his francophone colleagues’ position, and announced the union would be attending Thursday’s meeting with management “with a constructive attitude in the hope that it will be able to put a defensible offer to the rank and file afterwards.” Union officials came out of that meeting expressing surprise that management had not budged from their original demands, while management declared, “Each party is committed to carrying out the new methods of working although nothing was signed yet.”

Marianne Lerouge, an official of CSC Transcom said the union had “already accepted a productivity rise of 2.33 extra days for the same salary.”

The unions have already called off strikes at bus depots in Charleroi and Liège. The June 10 announcement that the refuse collectors’ strike in Mons-Borinage had ended came before the actual meeting at which the unions were to agree terms with the company, Hygea.

The refuse collectors had received widespread support. Similarly, French- and Dutch-speaking students have expressed solidarity with striking railway workers, rejecting attempts by some student bodies to use disruption to transport during exams as an argument against the strike. Students also expressed support for striking teachers at public schools and colleges in Mons this week.

The FGTB-CGSP trade union had called the strikes against ending the link between salaries and inflation, but other unions did not support the call, allowing schools to remain open.

Further disputes are emerging throughout the country.

Pickets were set up around mail sorting offices from Sunday evening for a 24-hour strike at B-Post, called over staff shortages, demands for increased productivity and the use of self-employed staff.

Last week saw a 30-minute nationwide shutdown of the justice system, over plans to transfer control of the budget from an elected committee to a finance committee inspector. The justice budget will be slashed by around 20 percent.

A prison wardens’ strike is ongoing. Three prisons

return to work next week, but disputes continue at Forest, Ittre, Jamioulx, Namur, Andenne and Tournai. Two unions have called for a return to work, with the SLFP signing up to the new contracts accepted by Flemish unions last summer.

Leadership of the struggle against austerity cannot be entrusted to the unions, which have proved repeatedly that their sole concern is their own position as negotiating bodies within the capitalist system. The key phrase for the unions is Employment Minister Peeters’ call for “social dialogue.” In 2014, Peeters said he had been “tasked with discreetly contacting the unions.” They praised his offer to negotiate, with the CSC’s Marie-Hélène Ska describing it as “an initiative to re-establish confidence.” This April the unions wrote to Peeters and Michel pleading for renewed attention to this “social dialogue.”



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