

National 24-hour strike goes forward in Belgium

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Tens of thousands of workers are slated to take strike action in Belgium today, amid mounting anger at low wages enforced by state-run talks involving business groups and the trade unions. The strike, called for workers in both the public and private sectors, is part of a broad, international upsurge of strikes and workers protests taking place across Europe and internationally.

Strike action in Belgium began at 10 p.m. last night. In the run-up to the strike, the press announced that the national tram and bus network would be completely or almost completely stopped. In line with a legal minimum, half the regular number of trains are scheduled to run.

Both Antwerp Port and the Port of Ghent expect to be heavily impacted by the strike.

Large numbers of public school teachers are expected to strike, even though the education unions have refused to issue official notice of strike action. Rubbish collection is reported to be cancelled, as are parts of the postal service. Administrative employees in hospitals and fire brigades are also striking.

Skeyes, the national air traffic control agency, announced yesterday that it would not authorize air traffic between 10 p.m. Tuesday and 10 p.m. Wednesday because “there is no certitude as to the number of employees to occupy a limited number of crucial posts.” Brussels South Charleroi airport is to be closed. TUI Fly airlines has announced it will be forced to divert all flights to nearby international airports in France, Germany and the Netherlands.

The mounting anger against low wages and poor working conditions in Belgium comes amid growing opposition in the working class internationally after more than 10 years of intensified attacks on wages, jobs and social conditions.

In Berlin, approximately 70,000 teachers, child care

and social workers and other public sector employees are expected to take part in a one-day strike today. In Rome, local media reported that up to 200,000 people participated in a demonstration on Saturday, reflecting broad anger over unemployment and austerity cuts enforced by the European Union and the Italian government.

Across the border in France, tens of thousands of workers have taken part in weekly “Yellow Vest” protests since November against President Macron’s austerity policies and growing social inequality. They have recently been joined by “Red Pen” teachers opposing attacks on public education.

Meanwhile the strike by auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico, is expanding along the US border, while teachers strikes are taking place in the United States and in multiple countries across Africa.

The working class has overwhelming social power when it acts collectively. However, the organizers of the Belgian strike—the three national trade union federations—have not called the action to mobilize the strength of the working class against wage and social cuts. Rather, they are seeking to maintain control over the deep anger in the working class and let off steam through the limited one-day action, in order to allow the government’s attacks to proceed.

The unions felt compelled to call the strike action in January, after negotiations between the unions and employer associations broke down over the 2019–2020 national wage increases.

Under the reactionary and pro-business system set up by all the major Belgian parties and trade unions in 1996, national wage rises are capped at a level set by the National Economic Council. The latter publishes a calculation of what wage rises are acceptable in order not to lose “competitiveness” with Belgium’s

neighbors—explicitly, France and Germany. In December, the council set a maximum of 0.8 percent, while the unions claim they want an increase of 1.5 percent.

The unions fully support the nationalist and anti-working-class framework of reducing workers' wages in a race to the bottom with their brothers and sisters in France, Germany and internationally. They have permanent seats on the employer-union "Group of 10" which decides on what limit to place on wage increases.

The fact that they have been forced to call today's strike is an expression of their acute consciousness of the growing opposition in the working class, which they are seeking to prevent from emerging independently and outside of their control and from linking up with workers internationally—which is the only basis upon which a successful struggle can be waged.

Indicative of the impact of the rising cost of living and inequality, a retiree who participated in "yellow vest" protests last month in Brussels told RTBF news that he received 1,350 euros a month from his pension. "I get it on the 23rd of every month. It's now the 8th and after I've paid insurance, rent, energy and bills—which cost 150 euros—I only have 200 euros left for living expenses."

A number of wildcat strikes have been undertaken in the past year by rail workers, including one last June in Welkenraedt. At the time, union official Laurent Brock told RTBF that the strike could spread but "it's very difficult to say... This could take place anywhere, at any moment. The drivers are not happy at all."

Inequality has been further exacerbated by brutal austerity measures imposed by the right-wing Belgian government headed by Charles Michel in 2016–2017, continuing the attacks by his Socialist Party predecessor Elio Di Rupo.

The Michel government's measures included ending the 38-hour standard work week, by changing the method of counting hours worked from a fortnightly to a yearly total; and cutting the maximum possible wage increase that can be negotiated each year. The government has also tied pensions more directly to the number of hours worked in a lifetime, in order to prepare the way for raising the retirement age from 65 to 67.

These cuts have proceeded with the complicity of the

trade unions. They have previously called national one-day strikes like today's strike in response to social cuts, including in 2011 and 2014, but afterwards they promptly continued in planning and negotiating the cuts with the government.

While the opposition Socialist Party has declared its support for today's strike, it carried out similarly brutal austerity measures when it was in office under Di Rupo from 2011–2014. Di Rupo demanded the raising of the retirement age, noting that when Belgium's pension system was established in the 20th century, the life expectancy was only 62 years old. "Every year the life expectancy rises by two months," he complained.

In Belgium as in every country, the critical question facing workers in struggle is to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions. Workers need independent rank-and-file committees to wage their struggles and unify them with similar strikes and protests waged by their class brothers and sisters in other countries.



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