One-day national strike paralyzes Belgium

Will Morrow
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Large parts of Belgium were brought to a standstill yesterday, as tens of thousands of workers joined a national 24-hour strike to demand wage increases, and oppose government attacks on pensions and other social entitlements, and growing social inequality.

The strike was characterized by a stark contradiction. On the one hand, it demonstrated the immense social power of the working class, amid seething anger after a decade of deepening social austerity imposed by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Charles Michel and his Socialist Party-led predecessor, Elio di Rupo (2011-2014).

On the other hand, the strike has been called by the three main trade union federations, not to mobilize workers' strength in struggle against the government, but to let off steam and keep control over growing working-class opposition. The unions intend on the morrow to continue negotiating austerity with the government and the employers.

This fact was alluded to by the pro-business daily *Le Soir*. It noted yesterday that the trade unions were "all the more determined" to proceed with the strike because "they were taken off guard by the Yellow Vest movement, which has implicated them just as much as the political establishment."

The unions are fearful of the growing movement of the working class internationally, and growing anger among workers at the unions. In Berlin, 70,000 teachers, social workers and other public-sector employees joined a city-wide strike yesterday, with more than 10,000 joining a rally. The unions were compelled to call this "warning strike" in response to workers' militancy. Other strikes by teachers are ongoing internationally, including in Africa and the United States.

In Belgium, yesterday's strike affected the public and private sectors and covered both the southern Francophone region of the country and the northern Flemish-speaking region. Workers in the major ports at Antwerp and Ghent took part in the strike, blocking shipments and holding up international trade. Workers also picketed in Ghent, while the unions reported that "hundreds" of nearby facilities in the area had been closed.

All passenger flights both into and out of the country were stopped throughout the day, after the national air traffic authority, Skeyes, announced on Tuesday night that "there is no certitude as to the number of employees to occupy a limited number of crucial posts." Brussels and Charleroi airports were closed, while TUI Fly were diverted to other international airports, including Lille, France, and in Germany and the Netherlands. Other international airlines, including Ryanair, were forced to cancel all flights.

Between 80 and 100 percent of buses and trams were cancelled, depending on the region of the country, while metropolitan trains were maintained at only half the total number of scheduled routes, in line with a legal minimum. Hospitals maintained a minimum level of emergency operations or saw patients on a case-by-case basis, with strikes by administrative employees in both the hospitals and fire brigades.

In the private sector, the strike hit more than 600 companies in the metallurgical and textile industries, according to a statement by Belga William Van Erdegehem, the president of the national Christian trade union. Workers also participated in pickets blocking entrances to industrial zones. The *Voix du Nord* daily reported picketing outside the Comines plant of industrial machinery manufacturer Ceratec. A minority of supermarkets closed across the country: Carrefour reported 44 out of 800 stores closed, and Delhaize 68 out of 650.

Trade union statements made clear that after yesterday's strike, they are proceeding to negotiate cuts with the government and employers—as they did after one-day strikes in 2011 and 2014.

The strike was called in January, after negotiations broke down between employers and unions over what limit to place on annual wage increases this year. Under a reactionary, nationalist system supported by both unions and corporations, wage increases in Belgium are limited every year according to a calculation based on wage increases in France, Germany and other countries, in the name of maintaining Belgian “competitiveness.”

In other words, Belgian workers must compete in a race to the bottom with their class brothers and sisters in other countries, in order to satisfy the endless corporate demands for increased profits. This “interprofessional agreement” is one component of what is called “social dialogue,” involving the corporatist alliance of the trade unions, the federal government and the employers against the working class.

Robert Verteneuil, the president of the Belgian General Federation of Labor (FGTB), told *Le Soir* yesterday, “the strike is not against the interprofessional agreement, but for an interprofessional agreement that respects workers.” He demanded that Employment Minister Kristiaan Peeters “do his job” and “maintain the social concertation.”

Even union leaders’ official demands would maintain poverty-level wages for thousands of workers. While employers’ associations are demanding that wage increases be kept at 0.8 percent—which the unions have themselves noted would amount to a wage increase of €9 per month for a hospitality worker—the unions are demanding 1.4 percent. By the same calculation, this amounts to €15 extra.

This when social conditions, in Belgium, as across the European Union, are explosive. While it is presented internationally in the media as a country of relative prosperity, supposedly emblematic of the social benefits of the European Union, social inequality is rapidly rising while living conditions for broad masses of workers continue to deteriorate.

A report published last October by the European statistical agency Eurostat revealed that 20 percent of the population, or 2.3 million people, is threatened with poverty or social exclusion. Over one in eight Belgians lived in a household with a very low level of employment, a rate that is higher than the European average of 9.3 percent.

In the capital, Brussels, more than one-third of the population lives on an income below the official poverty line, which is set at just €260 a week for a single person, or €546 a week for a family of four. One in five people received social assistance in Brussels. In the southern Wallonia region, one person in four is threatened with poverty; over 20 percent live below the poverty line. For single-parent households, the poverty rate is 46.7 percent.

Following PS austerity cuts under di Rupo, the Michel government which came to power in 2014 has launched a brutal austerity offensive, including 20 percent cuts to cultural and scientific budgets, privatizations, and pension cuts. The government’s 2016-2017 labor laws ended the 38-hour work week and tied pension levels more directly to the number of years worked, paving the way for raising the retirement age.

In contrast, Michel’s 2018 military budget includes a five-fold increase in non-budgeted military allocations, with €9.2 billion spending on military equipment between 2020 and 2030.

For workers seeking to take forward a struggle, the critical question remains taking the fight out of the hands of the pro-corporate trade unions. Workers need their own, independent organizations, rank-and-file committees in every workplace, democratically controlled by and for workers themselves. Such committees would enable workers to reach out and unify their struggle with their class brothers and sisters across Europe.