

Hunger strike of hundreds of undocumented migrants in Belgium

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23 July 2021

Over 430 undocumented migrants in Belgium have staged a hunger strike, lasting more than two months, to protest against their brutal treatment at the hands of Belgian authorities amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The workers are reportedly mainly from Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Pakistan. They have demanded that the government grant them the right to stay in the country, after many of them have worked for years there without receiving residency papers. Belgian authorities have insisted that they can be deported and returned to their countries of origin.

Representatives of the protesters announced on Wednesday, at the Beguinage church in Brussels, one of the sites where the hunger strike has taken place, that they would provisionally bring an end to the protest. “Yesterday and today, there were meetings with the government and with supporters. We were able to reach agreements which are yet to be ratified. We hope that they will be. So that there will be no more anguish inside the church, we took the decision to stop the water strike and to suspend, for the moment, the hunger strike,” they stated. Several protesters are reportedly continuing the hunger strike, however.

On Thursday afternoon, the Union for the Regularisation of *Sans-Papiers* (USPR) announced on Facebook that the occupation of the church and two university canteens in Brussels would be maintained in support of the migrant workers who remained there.

The Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Sammy Mahdi (Christian-Democrats), insisted to RTBF (television) that nothing had changed in the government’s anti-migrant policy. Throughout the hunger strike, he repeatedly denounced the protesters.

“We are not going to make deals on our migration policy,” he said on Wednesday. “There is a policy with rules that must be followed. We explained that many

times ...” Mahdi released a statement Wednesday, contemptuously declaring: “After 60 days, the hunger strikers have brought an end to their action, which placed their lives in danger. The way in which the situation worsened these last weeks had a major impact on me. It is good that we were able to convince the different civil groups that a collective regularisation is not a solution and that the existing procedures are humane.”

In reality, the protesters have described the inhumane conditions that they have been compelled to live under as a result of the anti-migrant policies of the Belgian political establishment and European Union. They received no government assistance throughout the pandemic, many of them having worked informally in the hospitality, construction, cleaning and services industry and having quite literally been left to starve during the pandemic lockdowns.

Kiran Adhikeri, originally from Nepal, worked as a chef until restaurants were closed. He has lived in Belgium for 16 years but still has no legal protection. He told Reuters: “I am 37 years old. I love this society, its people, but I have no legal existence. In this city, we live like rats. I am begging them (the Belgian government), please give us access to work, like others. I want to pay taxes, I want to raise my kid here.” The workers have described being exploited by employers paying them as little as €3 per hour due to their lack of work permits.

There are reportedly a staggering 150,000 people living under these conditions across the country.

The hunger strike had developed into a major scandal for the government, triggering widespread popular opposition to the government’s inhumane policies. A number of migrants in the protest had sewn their lips shut and were in danger of dying. The United Nations

was compelled to release a statement after a visit by two rapporteurs on July 8 to Brussels, stating: “The information that we have received is alarming. Many hunger strikers are between life and death.” It warned of the “violation of the human rights” of more than 150,000 undocumented workers across the country.

On Monday evening, the French-language daily *Le Soir* reported that the vice prime minister of the government, Pierre Yves Dermagne, of the francophone Socialist Party (PS), threatened that the PS ministers and secretaries of state would resign if a protester died. This would include himself, Karine Lalieux (pensions), Ludivine Dedonder (defence) and junior minister for strategic investments, Thomas Dermine.

The co-president of Ecolo (the Greens), pledged to do the same, stating that the party had “made known yesterday to the Prime Minister” that “our actions will be heard and in clear correspondence with our words.” The Greens and PS make up part of the seven-party coalition government in Belgium, which includes both the Francophone and Flemish social democrats, Greens, Liberals and the Flemish Christian Democrats.

The Flemish Socialist Party, which split along linguistic lines from the francophone Socialist Party in 1978, backed Belgian President Alexander de Croo’s open denunciations of the protesters. “Regularisation remains an exceptional procedure and is a favour, not a right,” he said.

The PS and Greens’ threats to resign were entirely hypocritical, and motivated by fear of the development of mass opposition in the working class against the government’s policies. While the deputies declared their outrage at the prospect of the hunger strikers dying, they have no similar compunction over the conditions of social misery imposed on tens of thousands of undocumented workers across Belgium.

This did not prevent Nabil Boukli, the deputy for the pseudo-left Belgian Workers Party, praising their actions in a speech to the parliament on July 2. Boukli stated, “Mr Secretary of State, even inside your government, parties like the PS and the Greens have risen up to demand a solution to this situation. I encourage them and support them in this initiative.”

In reality, in both Belgium and in neighbouring France, the Socialist Party has maintained and deepened anti-migrant policies over a period of decades. The hunger strike in Belgium underscores the

criminal character of the anti-immigrant regime of the entire European Union.

The EU works to prevent rescue operations in the Mediterranean—condemning untold thousands of refugees to drown as they try to make the journey from Africa or the Middle East to Europe—in an effort to dissuade asylum seekers from exercising their democratic right to asylum. It has erected a network of detention camps around its borders, such as at Moria, Greece, where hundreds of children are held in horrific conditions. Those who manage to arrive in the continent and to then avoid deportation are routinely denied access to state support and working rights.

These measures are ultimately aimed at undermining the democratic and social rights of the entire working class, migrant and European-born alike. The defence of the rights of all workers of all countries to live and work in any country they choose, with full citizenship rights, is an essential part of the working class’s struggle against capitalism.



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