

One-day national public sector strike against inflation brings Belgium to a halt

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On Tuesday, a one-day nationwide public sector strike paralyzed Belgium. Public sector unions in Belgium had announced strike action against the cost-of-living crisis and staff shortages, and for better working conditions. The strike brought together Flemish- and French-speaking workers across this country of 11.5 million inhabitants, hitting train and mass transit, logistics, postal and other public services.

Only a quarter of all trains operated nationwide, Belga news agency reported, with “few or no buses and trains” in Brussels and the francophone Wallonia region. Local and national public transport was particularly affected. In the Belgian provinces of Liège, Namur and Luxembourg, trains came to a complete standstill. In the capital, Brussels, only one of the city’s four metro lines was operating. In Antwerp, 55 percent of the buses, trams and metros ran.

Trains between Maastricht and Liège stopped on Monday evening, as well as many trains between Roosendaal and Antwerp. At the transport company De Lijn, 35 to 50 percent of departures were cancelled.

International connections such as the Deutsche Bahn’s Brussels-Frankfurt connection and Thalys’ Paris-Brussels-Dortmund train were also entirely cancelled. The Dutch press reported that no Belgian train traffic ran between Belgium and Germany, nor to Maastricht in the Netherlands or the duchy of Luxembourg, during the strike.

Rail workers defied minimum service requirements and other legal moves imposed by the employers to block or illegalise strike action. Workers “essential to the circulation of the trains” had to inform “at the latest 72 hours before the start of the strike, of their intention to take part or not in strike”, according to Belgian Train.

At least 75 ships were blocked in ports in Flanders as

the strike closed down the locks. A further 65 ships were blocked at locks at Diepenbeek, Genk, Hasselt and Wijnegem on the Albert Canal connecting Antwerp to Liège.

Public broadcasting, waste collection, administration, postal services and education were also affected. Strikes at Belgian public broadcasters VRT and RTBF led to shortened TV news.

There was no rubbish collection in the regions of Wallonia and Brussels.

In Charleroi (Wallonia), a march started from the site of the Intermunicipal Waste Tibi and going towards the city center gathered Charleroi public service workers around demands such as increased purchasing power and more resources for public services.

At the Belgian post corporation Bpost, a large majority of post office branches were closed in Wallonia, and 65 percent were closed in Brussels. Four percent of post office branches were closed in Flanders. On Twitter, Bpost management announced that “the strike will have an impact on the service in post offices, contact center, collection, processing and delivery of letters and parcels.”

Prison staff also joined Tuesday’s strike. “Nearly three-quarters of our staff are taking part in the day of action,” General Confederation of the Public Services union officials reported to RTL, and “in some places there are even more.”

The Belgian strike is part of a growing movement across Europe against the global surge in prices driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and NATO’s war on Russia. This has driven industrial wildcat strikes and doctors’ strikes in Turkey, as well as mass strikes by metal workers and truck drivers in Spain. In Italy, a one-day nationwide strike by train and mass transit workers, textile workers, postal and delivery workers, and ferry

workers brought much of the country to a standstill on May 20.

There is mounting anger in the European and international working class. According to a recent report from the National Bank of Belgium, inflation has reached its highest level in Belgium since 1982, at 8.97 percent in May. This is largely due to surging food prices and energy shortages, as the European Union (EU) moves to cut off critical oil and gas imports from Russia.

However, the Belgian government publicly declared in response to the strike that nothing can or will be done to protect workers' lives or living standards. "Inflation is a difficulty that everyone must deal with," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo bluntly stated, refusing to announce any new measures against it.

"Business associations," the *Brussels Times* reported, "went even further, arguing that a salary increase for public sector workers would stifle the country's economic growth."

While the strikes in Belgium and across Europe have unquestionably demonstrated the social power of the working class, they also have revealed its principal weakness: the lack of international organisation, coordination and socialist perspective.

Without this, isolated one-day actions, however powerful, cede the initiative after the strike is over to national trade union bureaucracies that work closely with capitalist governments and corporate management. Deprived of their own organisations of struggle, the workers are not mobilised again until the next one-day action, whose timing is elected by the union bureaucracies and their allies in state and banking circles.

The bankruptcy of such a national approach is particularly clear when the threats of inflation, pandemic and war all have an international and indeed global character.

Belgium has been particularly hard hit by COVID-19, which has claimed 1.8 million lives in Europe and an estimated 15-20 million lives worldwide. Early in the pandemic, the Belgian bourgeois press championed reactionary calls to spread the virus and reach "herd immunity" via mass infection and death. As a result, Belgium confirmed 4 million infections, over one-third of its population, and 31,574 deaths or 2,717 deaths per

million inhabitants—the second-highest death rate in Western Europe after Italy's 2,766 per million.

During the pandemic, Brussels, the capital of the EU, worked to pour over 2 trillion euros into bank and corporate bailouts. While massively enriching the investing classes, the EU and the Belgian bourgeoisie insist that no money should go to protect workers' lives and living standards.

Even as Russian and US officials warn that the NATO military build-up could rapidly escalate into an all-out global war between NATO and Russia, the Belgian government is also sending tens of millions of euros in weapons to the armed forces and allied far-right nationalist militias of Ukraine.

In the initial weeks of the war, the Belgian state sent 5,000 automatic weapons, 200 anti-tank weapons and 3,800 tons of fuel to Ukraine. In April, it pledged to send heavy artillery including US-made M-109A4BE and French-made CAESAR howitzers. "What is important to us is that the Ukrainians be able to receive this material, that is the essential thing," Belgian Defence Minister Ludivine Dedonder told a session of the Belgian legislature yesterday in which she confirmed these weapons had been sent.

Inflation and other attacks on workers' living standards will not stop unless the handover of public funds to the banks and NATO's war on Russia are stopped. The struggle must be taken out of the grip of the national union bureaucracies and led by rank-and-file committees built by the workers themselves.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is the organisation that can be built to coordinate workers' struggles and launch a mass, anti-war movement in the European and international working class. Only such a movement can impound the public funds misappropriated by the super-rich, halt NATO's policy of provoking world war and stop the impoverishment of the workers by the socialist overthrow of the capitalist system.



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