

General strikes in Belgium and Greece, mass walkouts in France

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11 November 2022

The escalation of the class struggle internationally saw two general strikes in Europe this week, in Belgium and Greece, and a mass strike in France. Greece's general strike was the second this year.

The strikes are being driven by surges in the cost of living with inflation continent-wide at its highest rate in decades. Across the eurozone of 19 countries inflation shot up to a record 10.7 percent last month.

Belgium

On Wednesday, workers across Belgium, with a population of 11.5 million, joined a one-day general strike. The stoppage follows a one-day public sector strike in June.

They are demanding pay rises and that the coalition government intervention to reduce prices, especially of energy. Inflation in Belgium hit 12.27 percent in October—the highest rate since June 1975. According to the AP news agency, “Belgian trade unions say gas prices have gone up by 130% in just one year, electricity by 85% and fuel by 57%, while food prices also have increased.”

Belgium has an automatic system of “wage indexation,” which increases pay in line with a measure of inflation at regular intervals. However, 850,000 workers only receive this index-linked increase in January, so their pay will fall far behind rising bills. The index also excludes fuel price rises, which are particularly high.

Workers in public transport, airports, hospitals, and many private companies stopped work. According to *Het Laatste Nieuws* workers in the country's three main ports, Zeebrugge, Antwerp and Ghent, struck “en masse” and paralysed shipping.

Protests took place in the capital Brussels, including at energy supplier Engie's headquarters on Avenue Simon Bolivar near Gare du Nord.

The education sector was hit, with students, teachers and staff all participating in the action. At ULB, the capital's largest university, reported the *Brussels Times*,

they “set up picket lines on the Solbosch campus, to denounce the impact energy costs have had on students.”

Also joining the strike were staff at Flemish public-service broadcaster VRT who picketed “at the front of their offices in the municipality of Schaerbeek.”

Of other workers involved VRT reported, “Close to the capital in the Flemish region, the Brussels Airport at Zaventem is also the scene of a strike action, with some 150 militants gathered at the so-called strikers' station.

“An additional 34 actions are being led in the Flemish Brabant, the most noteworthy of which is at the company gates of the Coca-Cola factory in Ghent.”

In Wallonia, “Picket lines have mostly been placed up in front of businesses in the south of the country, with Namur serving as a hub for the strikes. Demonstrators have also gone to railway stations and hospitals in the city, causing the later to be slowed down.”

Employers and politicians lined up to denounce the strike. Prime Minister Alexander de Croo called for workers and employers to “unite,” claiming the government already implemented “a unique system, like nowhere else, which protects Belgians from the loss of purchasing power due to inflation.” The head of the Walloon Union of Companies employers' association told *RTBF* they opposed the strike because Belgium was in “a state of war.”

The unions emphasised they had no objection to de Croo's call for workers to “unite” with the companies making record profits at their expense. The president of SETCa, a subsidiary of one of the largest trade union confederations, told *RTBF* that the unions “are not asking for a general increase in wages... We are not irresponsible, we are not thieves of companies, far from it.”

Greece

As with the general strike in April, Wednesday's 24 hour strike was called by Greece's two main unions

representing 2.5 million workers, the private sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY). Workers who are members of the All Workers Militant Front (PAME) federation organised by the Stalinist Communist Party (KKE) also participated.

Thousands of people protested in Athens, and second city Thessaloniki. In Athens workers held up banners reading, "No to layoffs, no to pay cuts." Greek daily *Kathemerini* reported, "GSEE, together with public sector umbrella union ADEDY, are demanding an increase in the minimum wage, now at about 713 euros (\$717) a month, and the restoration of collective labour law as the high cost of energy and basic goods eat into people's disposable income."

Workers also struck to protest the conservative New Democracy (ND) government's recent attacks on workers' rights, including the right to strike and a spate of privatisations.

Reuters reported that after "clashes broke out outside parliament," riot police "fired tear gas." AP said, "two people were arrested in the capital and another eight arrested in Thessaloniki."

In Athens, the transport network ground to a halt, including buses and trolleybuses which didn't run from the early hours until 9:00am or from 9:00pm until late into the evening. Ferries were idle at Greece's many ports. Air traffic controllers and civil aviation workers struck, with *Greek Reporter* noting, "Aegean Airlines and its subsidiary, Olympic Air, announced fifty domestic flight cancellations and amended the schedules for another forty-two flights, most of them international."

All state-run schools closed due to the strike and public hospitals ran with reduced staff. The news network reported, "Ships will remain tied up in Greek ports as the management of the Panhellenic Seamen's Federation (PNO) decided to participate in the 24-hour strike. The strike concerns all categories of ships and is nationwide."

Inflation in Greece is 12 percent, its highest level in 30 years. A nurse on the demonstration in Athens, Voula Pakou, told Reuters, "I can't get through the month... Making it to the end of the month means your wages will last you until the last day of the month. For me, my wages have already been spent after the first 10 days". Another worker protesting, Christina Skalouba, denounced the paltry sum of €9 billion euros in cost-of-living payments the government had granted to households, businesses and farmers since September 2021 "They are giving us crumbs to keep our mouths shut... But it's not going to

happen, because we cannot survive with just these measures."

Pensioners were raided and their incomes devastated by successive governments over more than a decade of austerity since 2008 and their misery worsens. With millions of Greek families reliant on pension payments, these have had not increased in five years. Pensioner Giorgos Paliouras said, "We can no longer bear the high costs. We can no longer bear the poverty. We can no longer bear the exhaustion."

The pseudo-left SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) had the gall to send a delegation to the Athens protest headed by their leader Alexis Tsipras (photo in tweet above). SYRIZA tweeted that Tsipras said, "The strike is a loud response of society to the regime of rising prices, insecurity and corruption." Under Tsipras, SYRIZA carried out from 2015-2019 an even greater destruction of workers living standards by imposing more brutal austerity than the ND/social democratic PASOK governments before them. These attacks were imposed in alliance with the GSEE and ADEDY.

France

In the latest of continuing strikes and protests against the Macron government, workers throughout France joined a one-day strike and demonstrations Thursday. They were protesting plummeting real wages, and attacks on pensions and right to strike. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) called the one-day stoppage of workers in schools, hospitals, and other services.

The CGT, as well as the National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions and Force Ouvrière also called a one-day strike at the Parisian public transport authority RATP Thursday, which had a large impact on transport in the capital and Île-de-France region.



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