

Belgian rail workers mount three-day nationwide strike

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On Tuesday, Belgian rail workers launched a coordinated one-day strike. The train drivers' union also walked out on Tuesday as part of its own three-day action. On Tuesday, only one in four trains ran in Belgium, while on Wednesday and Thursday the rail network was scheduled to run at half capacity.

Belgian rail workers are striking against poor working conditions, understaffing, and chronic under investment in the Belgian rail network. Despite the declining state of the Belgian rail network, the Belgian government will increase investment by just €225 million in the 2023-2024 financial year.

One Belgian railworker spoke anonymously to RTL to describe working conditions: "We no longer have any breaks at all. If we have to eat, it's while we're driving. And if we have to go to the toilet, it's between two stations and we do it quickly." He also complained that steering equipment is often defective: "On a route, it happens 3-4 times that there is a bug [then] we lose time and we have to justify it [to company management]."

According to RTL, the worker also explained that "his biggest fear is crossing a red signal due to distraction."

The railway network in Belgium is run by two corporations, the National Railway of Belgium (SNCB) and Infrabel, which are both savagely attacking their employees. In June, the SNCB announced 2,000 jobs will be cut in the next ten years. While Infrabel has already cut 4,000 jobs since 2017. These cuts have led to a chaotic situation on Belgian railways with trains often cancelled and late due to staff shortages.

Belgian workers and commuters have already faced the deadly consequences of overworked drivers and the ruling elite's refusal to properly invest in rail infrastructure. In 2010, a rail crash in Halle killed 19

people. The driver missed a red light, which should have resulted in the activation of the auto-brake, a requirement on Belgian trains since 2005. However, the driver's train had not been installed with one, leading to a deadly head-on collision.

With an overworked and underpaid workforce and insufficient infrastructure investment, there is an ever-present danger of another horrific accident.

Workers' anger is also fueled by rapid inflation, which is over 12 percent in Belgium. This massive figure itself masks the gargantuan rise in prices of certain necessary goods, which disproportionately impact the working people. In the last year, the price for gas has risen 130 percent in Belgium, fuel 57 percent and electricity 85 percent.

The Belgian rail strike comes amidst an upturn of workers struggles internationally, including a surge of rail workers struggles. These struggles are being fueled by rapid inflation caused by huge speculation on the financial markets and the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine.

In the UK, rail workers are in the midst of strikes against pay cuts and staff shortages. Eight additional strike days are planned by the Union of Rail and Maritime Transport Workers (RMT) before the end of the year and last week, 21,000 workers in the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen union went on strike. On Wednesday, the RMT also announced four days of strike action on the Eurostar service linking the UK to Europe.

In Austria, on Monday 50,000 rail workers engaged in a warning strike, after negotiations for a new contract ended on Monday. In France, Paris metro workers went on strike on November 10. In Italy, workers in all industries, including rail workers for Trenitalia and Trenord, are striking for one day on Friday, December

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In the United States, rail workers were set to launch a nationwide strike on December 9 after rejecting the latest contract offer. However, on Monday night president Biden announced he is seeking a vote in Congress to force a government-mediated contract on the rail workers to prevent the strike.

On November 9, Belgium also saw a one-day general strike, demanding pay rises, and another cross-industry one-day strike is scheduled for December 15. While workers are struggling to pay for life's necessities, Belgium's largest 5,000 companies are enjoying record profits, which doubled last year to 36 billion euros.

In Belgium and internationally, the crucial question facing rail workers in struggle against low-pay and dangerous working conditions is to break free from the stranglehold of the union bureaucracies, which isolate struggles and aim to contain them to the bankrupt, national framework of boardroom negotiations with the major corporations and governments.

In response to the one-day general strike on November 9, Belgian prime minister Alexander de Croo called for workers to "unite" with the companies. The president of SETCa, a subsidiary of one of the largest trade union confederations, heeded de Croo's call, assuring company bosses that unions "are not asking for a general increase in wages" and adding: "We are not irresponsible, we are not thieves of companies, far from it."

Belgian unions cite the country's indexed wage system to justify its refusal to struggle for increased wages, despite record corporate profits. However, the system does not properly protect workers' wages. For most workers, wages are only updated once a year each January, meaning that for each 12-month period up to that date inflation eats up workers' purchasing power. Furthermore, the increase is only in line with average inflation, and leaves workers exposed to massive over-inflation increases in energy prices.

While claiming to oppose deteriorating working conditions, the competing union federations—which artificially divide rail workers by job type, religion, and linguistic background—have overseen massive cuts to jobs and conditions of work for several years. Amid an intensified international offensive against the working class by the big banks and corporations, the union

bureaucracies play a central role in forcing through these rotten deals and isolating workers strikes along the lines of nationality and industry.

Nonetheless, pseudo-left parties such as Gauche Anticapitaliste (GA), which is linked to the Pabloite Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste party in France, continue to sow illusions in the bureaucracy, despite its commitment to bankrupt talks with the government and companies determined to cut jobs and pay. The GA called on workers to join the "struggle of the trade union movement against the liberal impasse of the De Croo coalition."

Contrary to the assertions of the unions and their pseudo-left supporters, rail workers in Belgium, as elsewhere, have nothing to negotiate with the capitalist government of De Croo.

In Belgium, as in France, Austria, the UK, and the US, rail workers' face the same attacks on their working conditions and standards of living, as well as the same obstacle to successfully oppose these attacks: the stranglehold of pro-company and nationalist unions over these struggles.

Belgian rail workers can only defend their conditions of work and standards of living by an international struggle which includes their brothers and sisters on the railways across Europe and the wider international working class. This must be conducted independently of the bankrupt union framework, which has collaborated with the companies and capitalist governments to attack wages, jobs, and infrastructure for an entire historical period.

The first step in a successful struggle is for rail-workers in Belgium and across Europe must follow their US counterparts who founded the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, free from the control of the union bureaucracies.



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