

General strike shuts down much of Belgium as ruling elite demands more military spending

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31 March 2025

Much of Belgium was brought to a standstill on Monday as millions of workers struck in opposition to the austerity programme of the federal coalition government led by Flemish nationalist Bart De Wever.

The strike was called by two trade union federations, the FGTB/ABVV and CSC/ACV.

Many schools across Belgium closed and hospitals operated with only emergency services. The *Brussels Times* noted, “This will be the third education strike in a row. At the strike on 13 January, more than 34,000 Flemish teachers participated—a historically high number.”

Public transport services were paralyzed, with only one in three flights operating. All flights departing from Brussels’ two airports were cancelled.

Rail workers who had just completed a seven-day nationwide stoppage to protest the pension cuts and cost cutting in their sector, still joined the general strike, walking out at 10 p.m. on Sunday evening. In Belgium the national railway is required by law to operate a minimal service, meaning that less than half of all trains ran, with most peak-hour trains halted.

Very few buses, trams and metros ran in Brussels. The *Brussels Times* reported, “No buses left the TEC Charleroi depots on Monday morning... In the Liège-Verviers area, less than half of buses and trams are running. Out of 202 lines, only 71 are running.”

Many train services were cancelled, including international trains to the Netherlands, Austria and Germany. The ACOD marine pilots’ union said that ships were being kept in ports, including 30 ships waiting on Monday morning at the Port of Antwerp-Bruges.

Others on strike included the Brussels fire brigade and steel workers at ArcelorMittal’s plant in Ghent.

The Flemish VRT state broadcaster was still able to schedule programmes, but many employees did not report for work. Before afternoon and evening news bulletins a message reporting the strike was to appear on TV

screens. Such was the impact of the strike that many businesses and shops chose not to open.

Monday’s was the second general strike in the space of six weeks against the coalition, and the third major strike already this year. On February 13, a multi-day strike saw around 100,000 on the streets of Brussels and thousands in other cities. On that occasion, the incoming government mobilised riot police against protesters in the capital.

The government took office in early February after months of coalition talks following last June’s federal elections. The “Arizona coalition”—named because the coalition party colours match those of the US state flag—is made up of three parties from Dutch-speaking Flanders: De Wever’s conservative N-VA, the centrist Christian-Democrats and the social democratic Vooruit (Onward). Also included is the Christian democrat Les Engagés and right-wing Reformist Movement from French-speaking Wallonia.

Central to their agreement is the implementation of a brutal austerity programme cutting pensions and limiting unemployment benefits to one year with strict conditions for extensions. During the eight months of negotiations to finalise a coalition, there were also proposals made to dismantle wage indexation to the cost of living, but the five parties decided not to try to enforce it at this stage.

The government plans to save €2.7 billion euros annually on pension costs by calculating public sector pensions in the same way as those of private-sector workers. Under its plans, those who work past retirement age with 35 years of service will see more financial reward, while early retirees without 35 years face a penalty. The proposals will disproportionately hit lower-income earners compared to the previous system, which provided retirees with a lump sum based on career length.

Federal Minister for Finance and Pensions Jan Jambon insisted Monday, “We have to do this reform, we have to bite the bullet for a while... We are a reform government that is implementing major reforms in many areas, and that

always brings some friction.”

This is just a down payment on overall planned budgetary savings of €18 billion which will have a brutal impact on the working class, with almost 20 percent of the population already exposed to the risk of poverty or social exclusion.

The austerity is being demanded by the European Union (EU). Last June, the EU’s European Commission triggered its excessive deficit procedure against Brussels for breaching the threshold of 3 percent of GDP—and total public debt at or above 60 percent of GDP. Belgium’s budget deficit must be slashed by at 0.5 percent of GDP. De Wever is committed to complying through drastic public spending cuts as there are no plans to raise tax.

Demonstrations and blockades were held during the strike at the entrances to several stores and retail outlets—including Foot Locker, Kiko Milano, Zara, Primark, Pull & Bear, Fnac and Action—on Nieuwstraat, Belgium’s main shopping street. Retail workers will suffer under the coalition’s plans, with Sunday working normalised and treated like a normal working day. The government also wants the rate for night work to apply only from midnight, which will hurt distribution workers.

The strike would have had more impact, but it faced opposition from the General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (CGSLB/ACLVB), the smallest of the federations, which openly sided with the government. Its national president, Gert Truyens, declared weeks ahead of the strike, “This government was democratically elected and we want to give consultation a chance.”

There is no “consultation” or negotiation on offer when it comes to austerity, as is clear from De Wever’s message to workers during last month’s mass strike: “The course is irreversible.”

The representatives of the ruling elite demand the working class pays to maintain corporate profitability and to fund a huge military rearmament. In the lead-up to the strike, business organisations sought to whip up hostility, with the Flemish employers’ organisation Voka denouncing the action as “completely irresponsible and incomprehensible”.

The *Brussels Times* reported that the Voka “called on mayors to ensure that industrial zones remain accessible and to prevent blockades of business sites on Monday.” Voka, said the newspaper, supported the austerity as it was “needed to boost the competitiveness of Belgian companies and to stabilise the country’s social and economic systems”. Were the austerity to be imposed, “the measures might not even be sufficient”.

Employers estimated the economic impact of the general strike at “from hundreds of millions to half a billion euros”. The VRT state broadcaster reported Monday, “Voka points to the international reputational damage as airports and ports

once again shut down due to the strike.” It added, “Employers’ organisations calculated there were already 88 strike days in 2025”, with Voka complaining that Belgium is “increasingly becoming known as one of the most strike-prone countries in Europe”.

The growing movement of the working class in Belgium is developing under conditions of rising opposition to the militarism which has gripped the ruling class continent wide. The *Brussels Times* noted during January’s strikes: “Prioritising social security over defence spending is a recurring theme among demonstrators, as is Arizona’s planned crackdown on the right to protest”. Such opposition has also marked recent general strikes in Greece and Italy.

In February, the Belgian defence ministry announced it would increase military spending by €4 billion (\$4.2 billion) in the next months. The aim would be to increase military spending from 1.3 percent of GDP to 2 percent—the minimum level expected of NATO members—for the first time in the country’s history, by 2029.

Posting the announcement on X just eight days after taking power, Defence Minister Theo Franken said the government’s priority was to “put an end to what I can safely call a ‘period of national shame’: a period in which Belgium was not loyal to its status as a founding member of NATO, but acted as the most notorious free rider of the entire alliance”.

Even more brutal attacks on the working class must be rolled out, with Franken declaring, “And it will not stop there. In the medium term, by 2034 at the latest, Belgium is aiming for defence expenditure worth 2.5 percent of our GDP.”

Among a raft of plans are “to make a second brigade available to NATO in the long term” and to reinforce “with additional fighter aircraft”—on top of the 34 F-35As fighter jets ordered from US corporation Lockheed Martin in 2018 to replace a fleet of 54 F-16s.



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