

After nationwide strike, Belgian unions block further action against austerity budget

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1 December 2025

Last week, a powerful three-day nationwide strike movement against austerity halted public services, logistics, and industrial activity across Belgium. The strike, unfolding alongside a nationwide strike in Italy and the preparation of a nationwide strike in Portugal, revealed the immense power of the working class and workers' determination to fight policies of austerity and NATO militarism across Europe. At the same time, it posed vital issues of strategy and political perspective facing workers not only in Belgium, but internationally.

The right-wing Belgian coalition government provocatively adopted its austerity budget on the first day of the strike, November 24. At the same time, it kept pouring billions of euros into deeply unpopular military programs to buy F-35 fighter jets and keep funding the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine. The government, which has fallen to 34 percent approval in the polls, signaled its determination to continue austerity despite mass opposition and despite the strike.

The government aims to exploit the main weaknesses of the strike: the absence of international connections with workers mobilizing in struggle against austerity and war across Europe, and of a perspective for an independent mobilization of the rank-and-file to bring down the government. Despite explosive social anger, the strike remained under the organizational control of national union bureaucracies that aim to leave in power the hard-right government of Flemish nationalist Bart de Wever and Francophone Reform Movement (MR) leader Georges-Louis Bouchez.

The General Federation of Belgian Labor (FGTB) issued a statement hailing the strike but calling no further strike action against the government. The FGTB declared: "After three consecutive strike days against the policies of the government, the unions were successful in their bet and are fully satisfied with the extent of the mobilization." It mildly criticized the government, stating that "Its silence is deeply saddening," and that the unions might in future consider bowing to mass sentiment for further action:

The unions have heard the message sent today by the world of labor. It is evident that the success of the three strike days forces them to reflect, in the coming days,

on how to follow up with the social movement.

Raoul Hedebouw, the leader of the petty-bourgeois, Stalinist-Maoist Belgian Workers Party (PTB), issued a brief video impotently appealing for the government to listen to the people and step back. He said, "De Wever, Bouchez, and [Foreign Minister Maxime] Prévot, hear the message of those who make our country work: do not harm our pensions, the indexation of our salaries on inflation, or our night work bonuses."

The Pabloite Anticapitalist Left party issued a call for a "united front" with the PTB and the union bureaucracies. It called to "displace the center of gravity [towards] the social movement in all its forms: unions, collectives, associations, feminist, ecological and antiracist mobilizations, and movements of international solidarity." It was an appeal for the unification not of the working class, but of the various state-funded bureaucracies that dominate what capitalist media promote as the "left" in Belgium.

In fact, the message sent by the "world of labor" is that this government is unacceptable to the working class. The decision of the union bureaucracies backed by the PTB to delay calling further strike action and instead appeal to De Wever—even after De Wever has tabled his budget—is not to "hear" the message sent by the workers. It is to block the struggle the working class is showing that it is ready to wage.

Bart De Wever is the last generation of a family with deep ties to the collaboration with the Nazi occupation of Belgium in World War II. His grandfather Léon de Wever was a member of the collaborationist VNV (Vlaams Nationaal Verbond), and his father Rik had extensive ties to far-right circles in post-war Belgium. His elevation to the prime ministership is a signal that the Belgian bourgeoisie, in both its Flemish- and French-speaking components, is determined to smash what remains of the social gains won by European workers in the resistance against Nazism.

The budget de Wever presented on November 24 ends the indexation of wages on inflation (though initially only for salaries above €4000 per month) and raises the pension age from 64 to 67. It double taxes paid by consumers of natural gas as well as on restaurants, hotels and athletic activities. It

imposes a €2 tax on imports of small packages, typically products workers have bought from Chinese online marketing sites. It also forces 100,000 of the 526,000 workers in Belgium currently on disability to return to work.

The three-day nationwide strike action last week showed that workers are determined to fight these socially regressive policies, aimed at funding war against Russia and enabling tax cuts benefitting the rich at the expense of the working class. There is an instinctive understanding among growing layers of workers that there is no point in negotiating with such governments, and that they can only be dealt with via the class struggle.

November 24 saw a first nationwide transport strike primarily affecting the railways. Most train service on the National Belgian Railways (SNCB) was shut down, together with regional service in Liège, Namur and other cities in the French-speaking Wallonie and half of regional service at De Lijn in Flanders, where strikes were strongest in Antwerp and Ghent. Only a handful of metro and bus lines in the Brussels metropolitan area operated.

On November 25, strikes spread to the postal service, schools and day care centers, trash collection, and public hospitals, which delayed consultations scheduled for that day.

On November 26, strike action spread further as workers responded powerfully to the unions' call for a one-day national general strike. The Brussels and Liège airports shut down, shops and state administration buildings were closed, and workers set up picket lines in front of factories and industrial complexes around the country. The Volvo factory at Ghent which directly employs 6,500 workers was shut down by the strike.

Protests erupted in Liège the day after, when Bouchez tried to visit the city for a political meeting. A crowd of 600 people called on social media by anti-fascist groups gathered around the building where Bouchez was to speak, and clashed with riot police who had to be suddenly deployed around the building. Well beyond the forces mobilized by the current "anti-fascist" groups, however, the working class is seeking to fight the Belgian government and similar governments across Europe.

The only way for the working class to halt the downward spiral of war and social retrogression is to bring down governments like those of de Wever in Belgium and Meloni in Italy across Europe. Critical political conclusions must be drawn. Such a struggle requires a mobilization of the rank-and-file, independently of the bureaucracies and rejecting their policy of political appeals to figures like de Wever, based on a perspective of establishing workers power and enacting socialist policies.

As the first step in such a struggle, a movement to prepare a general strike, in Belgium and across Europe, must be built. The greatest exponent of this strategy was Leon Trotsky. He distinguished between a one-day national strike controlled by the bureaucracy and a genuine general strike, like those of 1961

in Belgium and 1936 or 1968 in France. Writing on the one-day general strike the French CGT union bureaucracy called in response to the failed February 6, 1934 far-right putsch in Paris, he explained:

The general strike is, by its very essence, a political act. It opposes the working class, as a whole, to the bourgeois state. It assembles together union and non-union workers, Socialists, Communists and non-party men. It requires an apparatus with a press and agitators ...

The general strike poses directly the question of the conquest of power by the proletariat. The CGT has turned and is turning its back on this task (the leaders of the CGT turn their faces towards the bourgeois power). ...

And what about the general strike of February 12, 1934? It was only a brief and peaceful demonstration imposed upon the CGT by the Socialist and Communist workers. Jouhaux and his colleagues themselves took over the nominal leadership of the resistance precisely in order to prevent it from transforming itself into a revolutionary general strike.

This passage, written over 90 years ago, still not only describes the role of the union bureaucracies and their political satellites today, but indicates the path to be followed. Rank-and-file organizations of struggle must be built in the working class independently of the union bureaucracies, and a revolutionary leadership based on the International Committee of the Fourth International's defense of Trotskyism against Pabloism.

This is the basis of a struggle to break through the obstacle posed by Stalinism and Pabloism, bring down the De Wever government, and replace the European Union by the United Socialist States of Europe.



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