

High school protests against austerity, repression and war spread to Belgium

Joshua Seubert
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For the past week, a wave of school protests has shaken French-speaking Belgium. On Thursday, October 1, several hundred students blockaded around a dozen secondary schools in Liège. The movement has since spread to large parts of Wallonia—Charleroi, Mons, Arlon, Virton, Hannut, Herstal, Verviers, Tournai and Huy—as well as to Brussels. On October 7, university students in Liège and Seraing also joined the movement.

The outbreak of youth protests in Belgium reveals the rapid international spread of protests across Europe, amid a significant wave of strikes in the United States, as well. It took place a week after the beginning of mass high school protests in France that have staggered President Emmanuel Macron’s government. This is part of a far broader movement including mass housing protests in Spain, the public sector strikes in Portugal, and protests against conscription in Germany.

The spread of protests to Brussels, capital of the European Union (EU) and of the NATO military alliance, underscores that this movement is fundamentally directed against austerity, imperialist war, and the capitalist system that gives rise to them.

The Belgian high school protests began in Liège. The day after protests began, 500 to 600 youth marched through the city. On October 5, *L’Avenir* reported that “thousands” protesting at schools across the city. Several hundred students marched in Verviers, as well as Tournai, Virton and Hannut. In Brussels, around 100 students blockaded the Athénée Charles Janssens in Ixelles for the whole week, and on October 7 around 250 young people marched from Central Station. In Mons, according to *La Libre*, students went around “all the schools in the city.”

The Belgian students are opposing the austerity “program decree” adopted on June 5 by the Wallonia-

Brussels Federation, ruled by the liberal Reform Movement (MR) and the Christian democratic Les Engagés. It provides for cuts of €500 million by 2029. High school teachers are to teach 22 instead of 20 periods per week with no increase in pay—a measure that would slash 1,300 full-time jobs.

The higher education tuition fee (minerval) is rising from €835 to €1,194, with 58 percent of students paying the full rate. The budget for free school meals is being cut from €21 million to €14 million, and for school supplies from €24 million to €11 million. On top of this comes the planned abolition of the €12 annual pass for youth on Wallonia’s buses.

The students are explicitly protesting in solidarity with their teachers, who have gone on a series of strikes since the fall of 2025. “My teachers were on strike, I wanted to support them,” one student told RTBF. They demand smaller classes—classes with 35 students per teacher are often cited—the renovation of dilapidated and asbestos-contaminated buildings, the retention of school meals and extracurricular projects, as well as affordable bus passes.

At a demonstration in Liège, protesters also denounced the Belgian government for cutting education “to invest in war.”

Youth are drawing the decisive connection: austerity and the billions spent on war and NATO rearmament are two sides of the same policy.

Belgium’s student organizations have admitted that this is a largely spontaneous movement, developing outside of their control. Calls to action spread from school to school via Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok. “It really is scattered. There is no one behind these mobilizations,” the president of the Committee of Francophone Students (CEF), Logan Verhoeven, told RTBF.

This refutes claims by Education Minister Valérie Glatigny (MR) and MR leader Georges-Louis Bouchez that students are being “manipulated” by “radical movements” and “far-left extremists.” Such propaganda are an attempt by the government to delegitimize a genuine social movement whose causes lie in mass opposition to its own reactionary policies.

The state has responded with mass repression. In the first week, over 200 people were arrested, the vast majority of them minors. In Liège alone, according to the mayor, there were 107 arrests by October 7; in Charleroi, there were 49 on October 2, including 42 minors.

Police used water cannon and tear gas to attack protesters and kettled them before proceeding to arrests, after which they were held in deplorable conditions in an effort to frighten other youth and keep them from joining the movement. Minors spent almost 12 hours in overcrowded cells; 24 people were held in a cell meant for 16, and one 13-year-old in solitary confinement. One 17-year-old told RTBF that he had been peacefully blockading in front of his school when he and his group were kettled and arrested.

The Liège public prosecutor’s office announced a “systematic response” to press charges and is investigating social media users. A 13-year-old was arrested over a post which, prosecutors allege, called for an arson attack on a school. The CEF told the press that property damage is “not comparable to the real institutional violence” that students experience every day.

The real violence, however, is that of the capitalist state—children who no longer receive a hot meal, classes of 35 students, asbestos in the buildings, and systematic military escalation by the NATO alliance against Russia and the Middle East.

The decisive question posed by the growth of the movement in Belgium and internationally is that of political perspective and leadership.

The CSC-Enseignement, CGSP-Enseignement and SEL-SETCa teachers unions have extended strike authorization until October 16. Together with the CEF and the student federation FEF, they are preparing a “youth bloc” for an October 9 national strike day of the union federations. But these bureaucracies have a documented history in Belgium: they organize strikes in order to channel them and bring them to an end.

After the three-day general strike against austerity in November 2025, the union bureaucracies wound down further action.

The CEF, for its part, is leading the student delegation to talks with Education Minister Glatigny on October 7, though she has already declared that she would make no concessions. But there is no reason to divert the anger and revolutionary energy of the youth into fruitless negotiations with a government determined to stick war and social cuts at all costs.

The students cannot defeat the police-state machine alone. Winning these demands for an end to austerity and war means imposing a fundamental change in the social and political order, on an international scale. Such a struggle requires a turn to the working class, across Europe and internationally, and a systematic effort by youth and students to mobilize the working class in struggle, independently of the delaying tactics of national union bureaucracies.

Independent rank-and-file committees of action must be built in schools, universities and workplaces in Belgium and across Europe—democratically elected by those in struggle, and independent of the bureaucracies and establishment parties. Only thus can the youth movement be united with the power of the working class and develop into a conscious political movement against austerity, neo-fascism and war, and for workers power and socialism.



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