

Nearly 200 arrested as Belgian youth defy crackdown on education protests

Robert Stevens
19 October 2026

Police in Belgium arrested 195 people on Saturday, as hundreds of school and university students marched in Brussels and Liège against education cuts. The protests, now in their third week, are developing alongside a growing movement of the working class against the austerity programme of Prime Minister Bart De Wever's five-party "Arizona" coalition government.

In Brussels, youth gathered at Central Station at 10 a.m., where police were already present in large numbers. Not authorised at the outset, the march was later permitted to proceed to the Midi station and grew to around 600 people.

Shortly after 1 p.m., at the Europa Esplanade, the crowd were confronted by lines of riot police, who fired tear gas and turned water cannon on the demonstrators before pursuing groups through the Anderlecht district. Brussels police later announced 150 arrests, among them 15 minors.

In Liège, around 250 mostly young people, joined by parents and some education workers, marched from Liège-Guillemins station. Police later used water cannon and tear gas against smaller groups and made 45 arrests, 12 of them of minors.

Interior Minister Bernard Quintin of the right-wing Reformist Movement (MR) declared Saturday that the protests were "pure and simple violence, organised and repeated to destabilise our society," vowing that "all necessary means" would be used against the "rioters."

The latest protests against education cuts began on October 1, when several hundred pupils blockaded around a dozen secondary schools in Liège, a week after mass high school protests erupted in France. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, it spread within days to Brussels, Charleroi, Mons, Tournai, Verviers, Arlon, Herstal, Huy, Hannut and Virton.

Including the latest arrests, since October 1 around 500 protesters have been detained, including at least 200 minors.

Young people and students oppose the "programme decree" adopted on June 5, 2026, by the parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The Federation is responsible for French-language education, and its government comprises the MR and the Christian democratic Les Engagés

("The Committed"), two of the five parties in De Wever's federal coalition. The decree forms part of a wider austerity programme targeting approximately €500 million in savings by 2029.

It proposes that secondary school teachers teach 22 periods a week instead of 20 with no extra pay, eliminating 1,300 full-time posts. The higher education fee, the minerval, is to rise from €835 to €1,194, with 58 percent of students (well over 100,000) paying the full rate. Other attacks include cutting the free school meals budget by a third, more than halving school supplies funding, and abolishing the €12 annual youth pass on Wallonia's TEC bus network.

These measures are part of a far wider assault. On Sunday, De Wever, leader of the right-wing New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, N-VA), presented his deputy prime ministers with a new plan for a multi-year budget to save €10 billion.

The cuts are the last straw for students. "My mom is sick, so I can't afford that [increased tuition fees]," said Chirine, 20, studying at the Free University of Brussels (ULB), speaking to the *BRUZZ* news magazine at Saturday's Brussels march. She carried a sign reading, "The biggest villains wear a suit."

Pauline, 20, also at ULB, said, "They use that budget for the army... And it doesn't stop there: a TEC subscription for young people also increases from 12 to 384 euros. Students do not have those means and I live in Wallonia. How am I supposed to get home on weekends now?"

After the first week of protests, Education Minister Valérie Glatigny (MR) met on October 7 with a delegation of 10 pupils, including members of representative body, the Committee of Francophone Pupils (CEF). Glatigny offered no concessions, only a "space for dialogue" in every school, RTBF reported.

On October 13, she convened a new "advisory committee". This was lent credibility by the teachers' unions, school federations, parents' associations, head teachers and, on some topics, the CEF.

Glatigny's hard line is the hallmark of De Wever's five-

party coalition, installed in February 2025 and pledged to cut pensions, cap automatic wage indexation and slash public spending. Alongside the N-VA, MR and Les Engagés, it includes the Flemish social democrats of Vooruit (Forward) and the Flemish Christian democrats of Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (CD&V).

It has faced more than a year of resistance, including nationwide general strikes on March 31, April 29 and October 14, 2025, followed by three days of escalating strike action on November 24–26, culminating in another general strike on the final day. This year, national demonstrations accompanied by strike action drew up to 100,000 into the streets in March and up to 70,000 in May. On October 9, between 30,000 and 50,000 marched in Brussels, including a youth bloc, followed by a public-sector strike on October 12. The trade union bureaucracies have kept each action to a limited protest.

Far harsher state repression is being prepared, with Glatigny and MR leader Georges-Louis Bouchez attacking school youth and students as dupes of “far-left extremists.” In an October 10 post on X, Defence and Foreign Trade Minister Theo Francken (N-VA) declared, “Yesterday, the red comrades from the socialist union [General Federation of Belgian Labour (FGTB/ABVV)] took to the streets once again to protest against the government. The result: half of Brussels was destroyed. The black Antifa shock troops led by Hedeboom, Joske D’haese, and company did their job.”

Raoul Hedeboom leads the Workers’ Party of Belgium (PTB-PVDA) with its origins in Maoism/Stalinism; Jos D’Haese is its leader in the Flemish Parliament. On October 11, Hedeboom accused Francken of “criminalising an opposition party.” The PTB-PVDA holds 15 of the 150 seats in the federal Chamber of Representatives.

Francken said in his post, “I’ve long advocated for the creation of an armed force that will crack down on them the way the gendarmerie used to... Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defence has ordered the FN303, a weapon designed to counter rioters. It’s time we finally escalate the level of force and regain control.” He concluded, “The days of coddling and apologizing are long gone.”

The FN303, a “less-lethal” projectile launcher made by FN Herstal near Liège, was used by occupying forces in Afghanistan and Iraq and by police forces in many countries. Its manufacturer warns that the launcher can cause fatal injury and to never aim at the head or neck. In Boston in 2004, a police FN303 round killed a 21-year-old woman, Victoria Snelgrove.

On Sunday, Francken told RTL-Tvi that what was required was a “gendarmerie 2.0,” a reserve trained by the military to be used to quell social disorder, and that he had De Wever’s backing. He declared, “When there’s a geopolitical conflict,

not riots but a conflict with Russia for example, these are military personnel who come under my authority... We’ve been doing this for 40 years. It’s worked very well.”

He added, “There is a need for more law and order”, insisting that a military-backed force must now be used at home. The government needed, “a highly operational reserve, mobile units with military training. And it’s because when things escalate like this, when the violence is so extreme and so extremist, we have to react; we have to maintain public order, we have to protect our citizens.”

Francken, a former adviser to N-VA minister Geert Bourgeois, built his career attacking migrants as secretary of state for asylum and migration from 2014 to 2018. He chaired Belgium’s delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly from 2019 and became defence minister in February 2025. In June 2026, he called for military training camps for “young delinquents.”

On Radio 1 Monday, Francken blamed a “street culture” for the unrest, conflating “very serious gang violence and drug-related violence” with “mass migration over many decades.”

Of the dozen or so demonstrators it interviewed at Saturday’s Brussels protest, *BRUZZ* reported, “none claimed that the protest was being ‘hijacked’ by rioters.” Simon, an 18-year-old student, said, “There is a lot of police violence ... This demonstration is not against the police, but the police are trying to prevent us from demonstrating, even though that is a basic right.”

Ibrahim, a 20-year-old engineering student, said, “In the beginning, we took to the streets for our right to education. Now we are even demonstrating for the right to demonstrate. We are students, we are demanding our rights, and there will be more and more of us.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact