Belgium: One-day general strike and mass demonstration in Brussels

Our reporters
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On Monday, tens of thousands answered the call of Belgium's three major trade union federations to stop work for a day. According to the unions, around 70,000 people took part in the nationwide demonstration in Brussels that morning. Alongside large union delegations, they included many young people.

The general strike brought air traffic to a standstill from early morning until late evening, as air traffic controllers joined the walkout. Some 60,000 passengers were affected at Brussels Airport, while at Brussels' second airport, Charleroi, only around 25 of the 429 flights originally scheduled took place. There were also strikes in many areas of the public sector, local public transport and the postal service. Schools, universities, public administration, health services and refuse collection operated on a reduced basis or not at all.

Alongside the union federations—the socialist-aligned FGTB-ABVV, the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC) and Synova (formerly the liberal union federation)—numerous environmental, climate protection and refugee aid organisations, as well as NGOs such as Oxfam and Greenpeace, had called for the general strike and the demonstration.

In their appeal, this broad front of trade unions and organisations—together with social democratic and pseudo-left parties—called on the right-wing government of Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever "to look for the necessary funds where the money actually is—and not from those who are already struggling to make ends meet." They demanded of the crisis-ridden government, "The government must pursue a policy that allows us to look to the future with confidence again."

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) advanced a perspective entirely different from appeals to the government. SGP members distributed many hundreds of leaflets calling on the working class to prepare a European general strike, independently of the union apparatuses and pro-capitalist parties and organisations.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgqCJGYVDXU

In a video statement at the protest, SGP deputy chair Dietmar Gaisenkersting stressed, "Not a symbolic protest, but a struggle for political power." Workers, he said, had the power to bring the economy to a standstill and paralyse the war machine.

The ruling class is preparing for war, and workers and young people are to pay for it. The union bureaucracies are part of the war machine. They confine every struggle to a single day and a single country, and stifle it before it can become dangerous for the rulers.

"That requires independent rank-and-file action committees, an international socialist programme and a new revolutionary leadership," Gaisenkersting said.

This perspective met with support among participants. Above all, they linked the social cuts and the rising cost of living—especially housing costs—to the billions that De Wever's five-party government is spending on rearmament and war.

Tessa carried a homemade placard denouncing rising "excessive rents." She explained that many flats stood empty because no one could afford them. The government and corporations were "destroying social housing; many people can no longer afford the rents." People were dying on the streets. "Rents must be capped."

Tessa said the government was making the poor even poorer and the rich even richer. "They put all the money into the army instead of social benefits and are even dismantling the few benefits that are left. I want this government to fall. The coalition is a fascist government; they give the money to private companies and the rich instead of the population."

Since February 2025, De Wever and his right-wing nationalist N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, New Flemish Alliance) have led the so-called "Arizona

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coalition," named for the resemblance of its parties' colours to the flag of the US state of Arizona. The coalition is in deep crisis. Monday, budget negotiations over De Wever's plans for savings of around €10 billion by 2029 collapsed once again. If the coalition fails to reach an agreement by the end of the year, the government will resign.

Tessa supported the formation of rank-and-file action committees. "Good idea. We should centralise our actions. We need a united front; that would be very important." She was particularly worried about the rise of the fascists in Europe, which, she said, could only be fought on a Europe-wide and international basis.

Valentin, a student and member of the FGTB's youth organisation, said he was also taking part because governments were cutting education and destroying social benefits on the grounds that there was supposedly no money—while putting "billions into militarisation." He too supported a European general strike. "All the governments in Europe are pursuing the same agenda, their neoliberal austerity policies and militarisation. The working class has common interests throughout the world. A coordinated European strike would of course be the better way."

Nathan carried a placard reading "Gennez devrait se gêner"—Gennez should be ashamed of herself. Caroline Gennez is the Flemish minister for welfare and poverty reduction, culture and equal opportunities. "She has pushed through severe cuts in recent years," Nathan said. He works with many artists, who, like him and his colleagues, are hit hard by the cuts.

He, too, understands that the current developments in Belgium are part of a European and international movement. But like others we spoke to, he hopes that "the politicians" will change their policies as a result of the protests.

This is a dangerous illusion. The ruling class is responding to opposition from the working class by building up the apparatus of repression and by fostering authoritarian and fascist parties in order to bring them into government. As long as the protests remain under the control of the union bureaucracy and pro-capitalist, pseudo-left parties, or the Greens and social democrats—Gennez, for example, is a leading member of the Flemish social democratic party Vooruit (Forward)—the ruling class will continue to escalate its policies of war and militarism, paid for through the gutting of social provisions, job cuts and the slashing of wages and pensions.

The interests of those in power and those of the workers are irreconcilable. The struggle between the two principal antagonists, the capitalists and the working class, is growing ever sharper. The working class must prepare for this consciously and deliberately.

Monday's demonstration and general strike in Belgium—like the general strike in Italy a few days earlier and the entire European wave of strikes and protests—demonstrate the potential and the power of the workers. This power must be mobilised consciously and internationally. In Brussels, SGP members campaigned for the building of independent, democratically controlled action committees in workplaces, schools and universities to unite their struggles across industries and borders and prepare a European general strike.

The leaflet they distributed concludes:

> A European general strike must not be another symbolic protest aimed at putting pressure on capitalist governments. It must become the starting point for a political struggle for power.
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> This requires a socialist programme that expropriates the banks and corporations and places the economy under the democratic control of the working population. The imperialist European Union must be replaced by the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe, united with workers in Russia, Ukraine and throughout the world.
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> Above all, the working class needs a new revolutionary leadership. The objective internationalisation and radicalisation of the class struggle do not automatically produce socialist consciousness. The decisive question is whether the growing mass opposition is armed with an international socialist perspective and a revolutionary party capable of uniting its struggles and transforming them into an offensive for political power.

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