https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7902

Belgium

Crisis sets in, and mobilizations too in Belgium

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV575 - December 2022 -

Publication date: Wednesday 7 December 2022

Slowly but surely, Belgium is entering into crisis. Inflation, especially in energy prices, is hitting the working classes hard. Mobilizations are multiplying but a coordinated and combative response, capable of making the government and employers tremble, is lacking.

On 9 November 2022, a national icross-sectoral strike brought the country to a partial standstill, at the call of the trade union common front. The movement was widely followed in many sectors and regions. This was the case, for example, in the air sector: even before the start of the strike, all flights departing from and arriving to Charleroi airport were cancelled, more than half of the flights were cancelled preventively at Brussels Airport (which also shows the formidable effectiveness that a determined intervention by the workers in the fight against climate change could have!) This was also the case in commerce (shopping centres), voucher-based work (cleaning sector), health (hospitals), public transport, education, public administration, petrochemicals and industry in general (the TotalEnergies site in the industrial zone of Feluy, the port of Antwerp, Alstom in Charleroi, Audi in Forest and so on)

The reasons for the anger are many but all converge towards the same consequence: the end of the month is increasingly difficult for the popular classes. Energy prices are exploding, bringing with them inflation while the law of 1996 blocks any margin of negotiation for wage increases. [1] The automatic indexation of wages to inflation is constantly challenged by employers; and the few government measures announced are one-off measures that do not make it possible to structurally compensate for the rise in the cost of living. For example, according to a survey by the RTBF broadcasters, one in three people are not ready to pay their energy bills, nearly one in two among 18–34-year-olds!

Rank and file combative and willing to continue

It was on everyone's lips on 9 November, during the interprofessional strike day: “We must not stop here”. And labour mobilizations are multiplying after a rail strike on 5 October, SNCB railway workers were on strike again on 29 November, and the Autonomous Syndicate of Train Drivers called for the strike to be extended on 30 November and 1st December. Railway workers are calling for more resources and investment in rail, but also “to put an end to the persistent deterioration of working conditions, mainly the lack of staff.”

On 16 November, it was the Public Centres for Social Action (CPAS) in the Brussels region that went on strike. And a call has again been launched for 15 December. Workers in these institutions are seeing an explosion in the number of requests for access to social integration income (which gives an idea of the scale of the coming crisis). They denounce a shortage of labour and an overload of work and ask for a structural refinancing as well as a wage increase, among other demands.

For the government, the media coverage following the report of the European Commission on the budget of Belgium, a “bad pupil” in terms of debt, does not bode well: there will be cuts (even more cuts) in public budgets in the coming years. And the refusal to move forward with a tax reform worthy of the name, which would take money from the pockets of the wealthy and the multinationals, will only make the situation worse.

Overall, less than two years from the next election, the coalition of four political families from the north and south of the country (Social Democrats, Greens, Liberals and Christian Democrats) does not have much more to offer. The government has indeed put the possibility of premiums on the table – ranging from 500 euros for companies “with good profits" to 750 euros for those "with exceptionally high profits", but we are talking here about a single premium, a relatively symbolic amount in view of the profits made by companies in the energy sector (two billion euros in "excess profits" for the Engie Electrabel group, according to the Commission de Régulation de l'Électricité et du Gaz – CREG) while monthly energy bills explode for households. [2]

It is in this context that the union common front calls for a new mobilization on Friday, 16 December, a demonstration which could be followed by other strikes.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: Donate then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of this article for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

---

[1] This law prevents any significant increase in wages. Since 2017, the maximum wage margin has been imposed by the Conseil central de l'Économie (CCE) and was fixed at 0.4% for the 2021-2022 period (apart from indexation). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), this law violates the basic freedom of negotiation.

[2] This premium is yet to be discussed by the "group of ten" which is made up of the government, trade unions and employers' organisations.