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Belgium

# After the demonstration against Michel-De Wever: now we must continue

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV497 - June 2016 -

Publication date: Friday 3 June 2016

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**Once again, the incredible strength and tenacity of the Belgian workers' movement has been demonstrated, as has the extent to which tens of thousands of active militants remain, through hell and high water, attached in all circumstances to their unions as central pillars of social resistance. Once again, we have seen how they refuse to bow before the steamroller of austerity of the right and continue against all odds to take actions of social resistance.**

The demonstration of the joint trade union front on May 24 once again saw huge numbers taking part. As usual, it is difficult for anyone to count exactly, but we were certainly at least 60,000. A real success, especially when we know that the demonstration was launched at relatively short notice, in the midst of the campaign for the social elections. [1]. Furthermore, it took place in a political and social climate that is still marked deeply by the aftermath of the terrorist attacks (on March 22). A climate in which the union leaderships had put, so to speak, all actions on hold, thus demobilizing, not to say demoralizing, many members and activists.

The demonstration comes at a time when the Michel-De Wever government seems weakened. After the attacks in Paris and Brussels, it tried to use the passivity of the union leaderships, which cancelled all actions and passively submitted to the repressive security policy, to launch its attacks on our social and democratic rights with greater intensity. But security, security policies and the beating of the war drum also have a price: millions of euros more for the police and for new fighter planes, but at the same time, massive budget cuts for prison staff, airport workers, etc., which did not go by without meeting opposition. So there was quickly a new series of strikes and social actions.

The right-wing parties of the government are not doing well in recent opinion polls either. The N-VA (right-wing Flemish nationalist party) would suffer significant losses if elections were to be held now and the other parties of the majority of the other parties would also experience serious setbacks. In Wallonia and Brussels, it would be especially the PTB (radical left) which would gain ground; in Flanders it would unfortunately be the Vlaams Belang (Flemish far right) which would gain strength, although it would mainly be a question of a rightwards movement, from the N-VA to the Vlaams Belang. The "left" as a whole, SP.A (social democrats), Greens and PvdA (Flemish PTB), would also progress in Flanders, which is of course remarkable news. But there is still clearly a lot of work ahead to build everywhere a credible left political alternative, firmly rooted and clearly anti-capitalist.

## Down with the Peeters Law

The trade-union leaderships, with Rudy De Leeuw at their head, proclaim everywhere that the goal par excellence of the present actions is to block the "Peeters Law" aimed at lengthening the duration of working time. A victory against these plans would certainly be good, and would give a boost to social resistance. But even around this after all quite limited objective, we have to give ourselves the means of achieving it.

The government would in fact like to push through parliament a lot of legislation on this subject, preferably already in the summer months before the parliamentary recess. To rely solely on new actions in September (another demonstration of the joint trade union front) and October (another 24-hour strike, this time with the support of the CSC-SAC and CGSLB-ACLVB) is not enough. The FGTB has called for another demonstration on June 24, but the leaderships of the CSC-ACV (Catholic union confederation), with the exception of the French-speaking workers of the CNE, and the CGSLB-ACLVB (liberal trade-union confederation) do not at present want to support this strike call.

Do the CSC-ACV and CGSLB-ACLVB think then that the government will change its mind with a demonstration? Or are a couple of technical concessions from Peeters at the bargaining table enough for them?

It can be said that statements such as those of the president of the FGTB (socialist union confederation), Marc Goblet, do not inspire us with much confidence. To say on RTBF on the evening of the demonstration that anything that Peeters is proposing can already be done today, but as long as it is "negotiated with the unions," is in itself perhaps quite true, but as a perspective, the "negotiated" maintenance of a lengthening of the duration of working time and flexibility is very thin gruel for most of us.

What about the demand for the reduction of working time without loss of pay and with compensatory hiring, as it was put in the list of demands of the joint trade union front before the demonstration? This demand cannot be only for propaganda or to keep us happy, but must become again a real perspective in our struggle, to which we are committed, all of us together. And what about the demand for removal of all the anti-social measures that we have been saddled with in recent years by Michael De Wever and before that, the Di Rupo government (against which we also conducted actions!)?

## Save our public services

The fact that many union leaders are only putting forward the Peeters Law as the central point also threatens to abandon much of the public services to their fate. In fact, workers in the public services are not only faced with these measures, but also with wide-ranging cuts in their services, a new attack on their pensions and much more.

Prison guards, railway workers, air traffic controllers at Zaventem airport... have already taken action several times in recent weeks, with or without the support of part of the leadership of their unions. The French-speaking prison guards have continued courageously to strike for weeks; the day after the demonstration, strikes broke out spontaneously on the railways at different places, against the management of HR-Rail which already wants unilaterally to make its employees work longer, without waiting for Peeters.

What are the socialist CGSP-ODOC, the Christian trade union confederations and the Free Trade Union of the Civil Service VSOA waiting for to link up all these movements and converge towards a generalized movement? For the improvement of working conditions in all the public sectors. For an urgent and indispensable refinancing of all equipment in public facilities (railways, post, education, prisons...)? In short, for resistance against all the neoliberal demolition policies?

On May 31, there will be strikes in various public services. There will also be demonstrations and/or rallies of activists in Brussels, Wavre (home of Prime Minister Michel) and Ghent. Unfortunately, these actions are uncoordinated: the CSC-ACV is bringing its members (French and Flemish speakers) to Brussels, ACOD (Flemish CGSP) is conducting an action in Ghent and the Francophone CGSP is going to Wavre. So far (as of May 26), the leadership of the ACOD in Flanders has, unlike its counterparts in Wallonia and Brussels, not yet managed to come out with a clear call for a strike on the railways on May 31, although spontaneous actions are starting.

As for the promised solidarity between different groups of workers, there is so far not much sign of it; the regional and central union leaderships are not calling on workers in the private sector to express their support or to testify support or take part in the day of action by the public services. It is not too late to bring about change on this aspect, but time is really starting to be short!

## Build the general strike

The recent spontaneous movements and the success of the last demonstration prove once again that people, and above all the active forces of the workers' movement, have had enough. Enough of taking blows without being able to counter them with the necessary resistance, enough of seeing day after day our social achievements demolished. Demonstrating, and even a new united strike in June, will not suffice for long. We must dare to draw the lessons of the strike movement in 2014.

To only plead for a "real social consultation," as do De Leeuw and Leemans, after having themselves realized for the hundredth time that with the present right-wing governments and the employers, it makes no sense to negotiate. It is not just wasting the time of the union members and activists but frankly taking them for fools.

No, we must dare to build a general strike. A general strike movement is more than just a national 24-hour strike. It is a movement that dares to go to the end, until the demands are granted. "Until the finish." A movement that will also experience ups and downs, where one sector that is already in action will draw in the other, where new forces mobilize for the first time, with all their illusions and imperfections but also with fresh ideas and a new approach.

A movement where there must also be a big place for the active involvement of the rank and file, including the least organized, with democratic decision-making, as broad as possible, by members and activists of the unions, and not only at leadership level. From now on, general assemblies at all levels, from the workplaces to joint action by different sectors, with democratic votes on further actions and on the list of demands!

Let us add to this that we must not only make our voice heard within our unions, and certainly not passively wait for slogans from above, but take our own initiatives wherever possible, in workplaces and sectors. The prison guards, railway workers and air traffic controllers have given us an example here. All struggles do not lead to victory, but not to fight inevitably leads to a defeat!

## Traps and ambushes, but we can avoid them

Easily? Surely not, there are plenty of dangers and pitfalls on that path. We can quote a few of them:

– We have already spoken above of the risk of division between the private and public sectors. The best approach is to start together, and along with unifying demands that help everyone to move forward, also take up the specific demands and aspirations of all sections of the working population. Besides that, we also need to go all out for active solidarity, as wide as possible, with everyone who is already in action at a particular time.

– The danger of division and even splits between different communities [\[2\]](#) within the trade-union movement. However, we still want to make it clear here that this danger seemed the least during the action plan at the end of 2014, when we were seriously in action in Flanders as well as in Wallonia and Brussels. It is precisely the different approach of the unions themselves at the negotiating table, where everyone hopes to win "their" crumbs, each with another strategy (to the extent that there is one) that increase enormously the risk. A new common battle around comprehensive demands can again make this danger retreat to the background or even eliminate it.

– It is clear that besides the fact of the unremitting attacks on the unions, at least in certain parts of the media but also by politicians, the euro began to fall, and some people are again arguing in favour of a more subtle attack. There is again a chance for a great movement of social resistance, an explosion that might be more difficult to channel this

time. It is certain now that for very many trade unionists, it has become clear that the restarting of negotiations after the 2014 strikes did not work, on the contrary. Most workers are rightly, immensely attached to their union; that does not mean they are attached to their present union leaderships. And even less to their failed strategy of negotiating at all costs, which has brought only defeats and a retreat on the social terrain.

So here and there people also call for the restarting of the dialogue, or even for small concessions around a form of tax on large fortunes (mainly in the CD and V). We cannot fall into the same trap as we did after the movement of 2014 and be drawn into a new round of negotiations for crumbs, or even a new "tax shift" which ended up by being carried out completely on the backs of people.

Are our union leaderships again hanging around the table? Only under democratic control, day after day, by members and activists who must have the last word, not just the central leaderships. Stop or "suspend" actions? Only if the demands are won, and after the agreement of the rank and file!

## Michel-Peeters-De Wever: back off

Such a strike can in our opinion only be built by us around the demand "Down with the Peeters Law." Such a movement will inevitably raise the question of the withdrawal of all austerity measures, from the raising of the retirement age to the attacks against the index and attacks against the unemployed, the sick and pensioners. And also the demand for real wealth tax, the abolition of military spending and the need for an alternative environmental energy policy.

Such a movement must also take seriously into account and dare to put on the table the demands of women for real equality and an end to all forms of discrimination, the demands of asylum seekers and undocumented people for of society.

To harden in this way, the trade union movement must, as well as taking action on the social terrain, work on a political response to the entire policy of the right, in all its aspects.

For us, and for tens of thousands of militant trade unionists along with us, it has already been clear for a long time: with the right, there is nothing to negotiate except the weight of our chains. This government must fall, by our struggle from below. Let us actively win to this idea our colleagues and the large majority of the unions, as well as movements like Hart boven Hard and everything that is a victim of austerity policies.

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## Harassment of women in trade-union demonstrations: Enough is enough!

As in previous demonstrations, during this one women demonstrators were again attacked, sexually, physically and verbally. That the men involved were sober or completely drunk changes nothing; such behaviour cannot be tolerated. It is high time for unions to make clear to their members that this is not allowed, and to take the necessary measures against members and activists who behave in this way. It is also urgent to devote much more attention to this question in union education courses. It is totally unacceptable that many women do not feel safe, or feel less safe than men, during union activities, and are thus at risk of being pushed out of the movement.

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## Small-scale clashes and Commissioner Vandersmissen

At the dispersal of the demonstration in the neighborhood of the Gare du Midi, there were some clashes with the police. As reported by the police themselves, few trade unionists were involved. The Antifascist Front and the French investigation group Résistance again noticed a number of infiltrators from the far right, just as was the case with small-scale clashes after other union demonstrations.

As is known, the Brussels Commissioner Vandersmissen was wounded in the head. We have no sympathy for this individual who once again, on May 24, behaved in a very provocative manner, as we saw on different video images. We hope therefore that he will as soon possible be able to take things easy as he gets older, with early retirement or in another job where he can do less damage with his sympathy for the far right and his tough approach to his profession.

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*May 27, 2016*

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[1] The social elections are the elections for workers' representatives to workplace councils and health and safety committees. The candidates are proposed by the recognised trade unions. They took place between 9 and 22 May.

[2] The term "communities" refers to the three regions, Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels.