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Belgium

After three days of strike, a vast social movement with no political alternative

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP611 - December 2025 -

Publication date: Wednesday 17 December 2025

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Belgium experienced a crescendo of strikes on Monday 24 November in public transport (trains, buses, trams, metros), Tuesday 25 November in all public services (including education and hospitals) and Wednesday 26 November, with the addition of the private sector, a day long interprofessional general strike that was widely followed in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels.

The success of the common trade union front (General Federation of Labour of Belgium (FGTB), Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (CSC) and General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (CGSLB)) is all the more significant as it follows 11 months of mobilizations without weakening the determination of the movement. This strike was better supported and longer than the one on 31 March and relays the big national demonstration that brought together some 140,000 workers in Brussels on 24 September.

If the unions' gamble was successful, so was the government's. On Monday morning, the first day of the strike, the government reached a budget agreement. It has welded together its coalition, which had previously shown signs of fragility. An agreement, copied and pasted from the demands of the employers' federations, to implement reform after reform attacking social benefits and public services. Two blocs faced each other.

On the one hand, the Arizona coalition, for which budgetary austerity is the priority of priorities and justifies sacrifices, and on the other hand, a social movement, the largest in Belgium since the "strike of the century" in the winter of 1960-1961, against a set of government measures which, under budgetary pretext, aim to dismantle the welfare state and break solidarity. [\[1\]](#)

The union mobilization, so important in the long term, has been met with silence from the government. Despite their repeated request, the union leaders were not received by the prime minister. Regardless of the strikes and demonstrations, the government is "reforming" as if nothing had happened and the movement seems, despite its strength, powerless in the face of the right's steamroller. "The unions are paralysing, the government is working," says prime minister Bart De Wever, promising to go all the way and reassuring his supporters.

"The old tried and tested tactic"

Belgium's social history is marked by its tradition of general strikes, decided and controlled by the unions to create a balance of power that would allow their demands to be negotiated with the employers and the state under favourable conditions. In the past, this old and tried tactic made it possible to build a social state that responded to popular aspirations in a way that was admittedly always conflictual. But when the contradictions sharpen and conditions deteriorate, the "ritualized strikes," which previously had ensured a balance of power, have become ineffective. They are no longer levers that can be used when negotiation becomes ineffective and parliamentary action sinks into a vacuum. The government can then foresee the effects of the movement and, despite inevitable losses, turn its back and let the storm pass. The planned strike no longer manages to get the unions and left-wing parties out of the impasse. The strike must then move away from its rituals that make it a cog in the negotiating process, become less predictable in its duration and effects, and manifest itself, in the words of Rosa Luxemburg, as a "political mass strike." [\[2\]](#)

A successful bet for the trade union movement, which has managed to give impetus to a vast social movement, but

the defeat of this same movement which is denied by the government which imposes its budget. A success that is still part of the “old tried and tested tactic”: namely avoiding liberticidal measures, trying to modify one or the other decision at the margins and above all maintaining the pressure of protest without exhausting the troops in order to influence the next elections in 2029. Compared to the scale of the mobilization, the expected effects seem as hypothetical as they are derisory.

Success of the movement and political disarray

As important as the success of the movement and the resolution of the strikers was, the disarray was great and suffered from the lack of political perspectives. Indeed, the turn to the right in the last federal elections in 2024 had traumatized the left.

The government governs but the opposition is not convincing. For the political leaders, the social movement aims to contribute to shifting the political centre of gravity back to the centre-left in 2029. However, Ecolo, which collapsed in the last election, is currently out of the game and the Belgian Workers' Party (PTB) (radical left) rejects any coalition with right-wing parties. There remains the Socialist Party (PS), which is experiencing a continuous erosion and which lost its first place in the French-speaking part of the country in the last elections to the MR (Reform Movement). The PS has embarked on a refoundation. It puts forward a programme and alternative budgetary proposals, but it remains powerless in the face of two reproaches that it cannot dismiss. First: why didn't it apply this program when it was in power? The response that the Socialists were in coalition with the MR is not enough, since they chose or at least accepted this partner. Secondly, having entered government after a right-wing coalition, similar to the current one, presided over by Charles Michel (MR), the Socialists did not abolish the unpopular measures they had fought against while in opposition, in particular the postponement of the retirement age to 67 and the tax shift mechanism which structurally de-finances social security. [3]

When the left was still in the majority in Wallonia and Brussels, the FGTB had launched an appeal for a PS, PTB and Ecolo government without having been heard. Now, trade unions, associations and personalities are calling for a left alternative. In Brussels, still without a government, but where a majority for an alternative coalition to Arizona is arithmetically possible, a draft has been made public. For the first time, the PS, PTB, Ecolo, Groen (Flemish ecologists) and Vooruit (former Flemish socialists) have come together to test such a hypothesis. Vooruit withdrew, however, on the injunction of its president, causing the initiative to fail, since in Brussels, the only bilingual region in the country, a double majority, Flemish and French-speaking, is needed.

Belgium is going to suffer from an austerity budget backed by a policy that considers that the sick are not really sick, that the unemployed are not really unemployed and that they must therefore be controlled and if possible deprived of their rights. Budgetary austerity goes hand in hand with a state authoritarianism that pits the “welfare” against those who “work” and in the neighbourhoods, as well as at work, the “legal” against the “illegal.” However, the movement is far from over and could still have many surprises in store for us.

1 December 2025

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [A l'Encontre](#).

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[1] Arizona is the name of the government coalition built around two major right-wing parties, the New Flemish Alliance (NVA - Flemish nationalist) and the Reform Movement MR (French-speaking liberals), four smaller centrist parties, two Flemish, CD&V (Christian Democrats) and Vooruit (ex-Flemish socialists), and a French-speaking party, Les Engagés (ex-Christian Democrats). Prime minister Bart De Wever, NVA, had previously said when he was president of the NVA that his party was the research bureau of the Flemish employers' association.

[2] Rosa Luxemburg, "The Political Mass Strike," *Vorwaertz*, July 24, 1913.

[3] The "tax shift" implies a reduction in social contributions for the employer, social contributions which are part of the deferred salary of employees.