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Belgium

Spontaneous strikes open a second round in the fight against right-wing government

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A new trial of strength has begun in Belgium between the rightist government and the trade union movement. On 24 May, 80,000 people demonstrated in Brussels following a call by the common TU front consisting of the FGTB-CSC-CGSLB. On 31 May, public services were paralyzed by a nationwide strike; the FGTB called for a 24-hour strike on 24 June and were supported by the National Confederation of Employees (the main organisation of the CSC Christian union in the French speaking part of the country); a new mass demonstration and a further day of strikes are planned for after the summer holidays.

The mobilisations are directed primarily against proposed laws that promote 'flexicurity' being put forward by the Minister of Employment and Labour. As with Valls and Hollande in France, the Christian Democrat Kris Peeters wants to take the battle into the organisation of work: annualisation [\[2\]](#) of working time (up to 45 hours / week), temporary contracts for an unlimited period of time, re-employment of the long-term sick ... But the discontent in the population is general: it is also about extending the time taken to reach pension age, exclusions from the right to claim unemployment benefit, and other regressive measures that contrast with gifts to the rich and the bosses.

Facing the neoliberal steamroller, the wave of struggles in the autumn of 2014 highlighted the exceptional strength of the Belgian trade union movement and its ability to present an alternative. Three months of mobilisation nevertheless ended up being derailed, with union leaders unilaterally deciding to stop everything "to give a chance for dialogue." This achieved absolutely nothing. Will we relive the same scenario? That is the question facing many trade unionists.

The union apparatus remains mobilised primarily to defend dialogue with the state and employers, allowing them to collaborate with austerity by damage limitation and keeping their control over the working class. But the government wants more: intoxicated by its success and enjoying the atmosphere created by the terrorist attacks, it not only wants to transform the trade union tops into transmission belts for austerity but also push TU representation in businesses onto the ropes by outlawing picketing and removing the right of workplace representatives to object to the flexibilisation and casualisation of labour. This is a frontal attack, inspired by Thatcherism.

In response, the union dialogue strategy is in crisis and this is shown at two levels, which are combined: the return of spontaneous walkouts, on one hand, and the widely differing negotiating positions at all levels of union structures, on the other hand.

Air traffic controllers spontaneously withdrew their labour for several days after the attacks, denouncing their working conditions. French speaking prison guards have been on strike for five weeks already to protest against the lack of staff. French speaking train drivers have joined them since May 25 against a management diktat that wants to extend their working hours with loss of pay. Spontaneous actions have formed a common front which has led the Walloon CGSP (FGTB section in the public sector) to adopt a resolution that gives official support to all actions beyond May 31 [\[3\]](#). There is talk of a strike to the finish. The dynamic which is typical for the Belgian Labour movement, by which the radicalisation at the base is reflected in trade union bodies, has started.

For now, this dynamic is unfolding almost exclusively in the public sector in the south of the country, where there is an atmosphere of an impending general strike to drive the Michel government [\[4\]](#) from office. As a result the polarisation between left and right in unions is sharpening and is developing a communitarian twist. If the more right wing trade union apparatus in Flanders is not dragged along in turn, there is a fear that some union sectors might be torn apart on communitarian lines. This would have serious consequences for all workers. In particular, such a split would bring the ruling class closer to its strategic objective: the dismantling of social security - possibly combined with

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it being split on community lines, which has already been demanded by the liberal-nationalist NVA.

The government is betting on the North-South divide to push through and inflict a major defeat on the working class. It remains deaf to the calls of some of the bourgeois press for moderation. Far from making concessions, "recognising its mistakes" and seeking to "bring a smile to workers (and all Belgians)," as it was recently urged to do by the financial daily L'Echo, those in power are sticking to their guns, even threatening to sanction strikers. This is a dangerous game. Because if the control over the rank and file by the trade apparatus is stronger in the north of the country, the movement of 2014 and the big demonstration of May 24 [5] show that workers' anger is no less than in the South.

Nearly two years after the farce of December 2014 [6], the fighting spirit of the sections of workers in struggle in areas opens up the possibility for workers to get pay back. Will the chance be taken? This largely depends on the initiative of trade unionists already fighting Barriers in trade union structures are numerous (and the PTB, with its line of tail ending official structures, is making no attempt to overcome them. But the pressure is rising: making an about-face, the head of the Flemish rail workers of the CGSP has just joined the call for strike action for the strike call on 31st May. If the dominoes were to continue to fall this way, the social climate could change completely, and even very quickly.

[1] FTGB - Socialist Trade Union Federation, CSC - Catholic Trade Union Federation, CGSLB - Liberal Trade Union Federation.

[2] Contracts specifying an annual number of working hours, whereby the number of hours worked in any one week could be as high as 45,

[3] One day general strike in the public sector

[4] Federal government of Louis Michel, consisting of three right of centre Flemish parties (NVA, Right-wing Flemish Nationalist; VLD, Liberal and one right of centre French speaking party (the MR, Liberal, his own party

[5] May National demonstration organised by the unions and campaigning organisations at comparatively short notice, attracting 60 000 to 80 000 demonstrators, as opposed to the 40 000 predicted by the organisers.

[6] National demonstrations called off by unions, using the terrorist attacks in Paris as an excuse.