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Belgium

“This mobilization has awakened something in the youth”

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This spring, French-speaking Belgium has seen a sudden acceleration of struggles in the education sector, which have turned into a general revolt of young people. In this interview, Evelyne Wyns discusses the conditions in which this movement emerged, the complex role of trade unions and self-organized collectives, and the politicization brought about by repression.

In recent weeks, French-speaking education has taken the lead in the sectors in struggle in Belgium. But this struggle does not come out of nowhere: the country has already been plagued by major struggles against the governments in place for two years.

Two years ago, Belgium had elections at all levels of government. Wallonia, a region historically dominated by the Socialist Party, swung to the right; and more generally, the whole country has gone in the same direction, with regional and federal governments particularly radicalized. As soon as these governments were set up, many sectors began to resist, particularly on the issues of pensions and social protection. Some have led hard struggles: ten consecutive days of strike by railway workers, four weeks at the Post Office and so on. And impressive interprofessional days, in particular on 14 October 2025 when more than 140,000 people demonstrated, which was unprecedented since the 1990s. In this context, governments have taken a hard line, saying that there will be no backsliding on their part.

But from the beginning, education was a key sector, at least on the French-speaking side.

The government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, i.e. of the French-speaking part of the country, has put forward proposals for reforms by “programme decrees” as soon as it was appointed, including programme decree 2, which has just been voted through. Among the measures planned is the end of the appointment of teachers, who will therefore be recruited on permanent contracts rather than with civil servant status – which makes it much easier to dismiss them, and exposes them to pressure from the political regime. But there are also many austerity measures, including the reduction of teachers' coverage in the event of illness, controls that reach an absurd aggressiveness, as well as attacks on the support system for precarious students – we are talking about 55,000 children who will lose their right to a free meal in the canteen. But what really set off the powder keg was the addition of two hours of work to all teachers in the last three years of high school, without a salary increase. It is two hours in front of the class, so in practice, half a day of work. This also means, in the long term, the elimination of 1,300 to 1,500 jobs.

Teachers have therefore been on the front lines almost since the formation of governments: sometimes in sectoral strikes, sometimes in interprofessional strikes, and sometimes with other sectors, such as early childhood, childcare, culture.

With, as the first culmination, the strike of 14 October?

14 October really lit something up in our country, with this massive demonstration that brought together all sectors of society. The month of November was very intense, with a one-day strike for teachers, then a sequence of three consecutive days of interprofessional strike, which was again quite unprecedented in Belgium. But at that time, one could sense a yawning gap between the determination of the workers, ready to increase in intensity, and the timidity of the union leaderships, which refused to seize the opportunity. This caused a temporary cooling of the situation, from January to March.

How do you explain this attitude of the union leadership?

Belgium's institutional model is traditionally based on consultation and compromise. But for the first time in a long while, the unions found themselves in a situation where the space for negotiation no longer existed. When the government invited them, it was to present them with laws that had already been finalized, without any margin to modify them. And they haven't found a strategy to deal with this.

At each demonstration, throughout this first phase of the social movement, the union leaders took the floor to demand a return to the negotiating table, as if that were the only desirable horizon – to return to a table where, in any case, it was agreed that they would not be listened to. They have never really become aware of the fact that the model of Belgian-style consultation, in hushed meetings and stuffy restaurants, no longer exists.

But the social movement abhors a vacuum...

Yes, and this situation has encouraged the emergence of self-organized collectives. Some, such as *École en lutte*, already existed, but have taken on a new dynamic in this context, by criticizing this model of “drop by drop” strikes and demonstrations that were repeated identically from the Gare du Nord to the Gare du Midi. They used slightly more radical modes of resistance, including sabotaging examination procedures. Tension mounted, until delegates were expelled from their union for “dual membership”.

At the CSC , I asked the question openly: I am an activist, an anti-fascist, I am a member of *École en lutte*. [\[1\]](#). How secure am I in this organization? Should I expect to be excluded? These questions raised a great deal of unease, and the watchword of the principals was clearly to distance themselves.

What really changed the situation was that a group of teachers, in a particularly active school in Brussels, decided to set up a collective on a larger scale. They have shown themselves to be quite skilful in their communication and relations with the press, preparing the ground well, and making the founding of this organization an event in itself. Their idea was to have a group with an easily recognizable aesthetic, that everyone could make their own: so they called it *Mars Attacks*, because the launch took place in March, and they used the imagery from Tim Burton's film to create their visuals, videos and costumes.

At the launch, the collective brought together ten schools. But in the aftermath, it organized a general meeting to which everyone was invited: teachers, families, friends, spouses and so on. The snowball effect followed, helped quite strongly by the effectiveness of the communication which was able to attract good coverage by the press. Schools were added one after the other, and at the demonstration that followed, on 9 April, the size of the *Mars Attacks* bloc rivalled that of the unions.

Tensions did not reduce immediately, far from it. From the point of view of many union leaders, *Mars Attacks* remained a collective of anarchic Brussels residents, doomed to disappear quickly. And what added fuel to the fire was that the minister contacted *Mars Attacks* directly, rubbing salt in the wound of the union leaderships who lost their historic place as negotiators. During the day of mobilization on 9 April, these tensions almost took an even more acute turn, with many members of *Mars Attacks* pushing for the collective to take the lead in the procession and start the demonstration without waiting for the union to speak. This did not happen, but the episode illustrates the paradoxical nature of this collective: a mix of unionized and non-unionized teachers, many of whom are participating in a social movement for the first time, with an offbeat and good-natured aesthetic as teachers like it, a broader and more consensual political identity than very left-wing collectives such as *École en lutte*... but at the same time, a strong desire to break out of the habits of the conventional social movement, through disobedience. And it's all the more interesting that on the other side, the unions, who look down on these activists, nevertheless shared the images

of the *Mars Attacks* cortege on their social networks – especially the CSC, which played on the fact that the Martian costumes populating the bloc were mostly green, like the traditional vests of the confederation.

From there, together with a number of activists, we pushed for the CSC to honestly acknowledge the situation: if the unions always had the masses with them, they lacked ideas, and that's precisely what collectives like this brought to the table. This internal pressure bore fruit: quickly, the *CSC Enseignement* published a statement stating that it supported all actions in the direction of its demands, and implying that it would cover for its affiliates who participated. The CGSP was forced to follow suit, but more timidly. But this new context allowed for a rapid escalation, and *Mars Attacks* grew week by week.

To the point of calling for a strike to the finish?

The first announcements on the timetable for the reform, which was then announced to be voted on 27 May, served as an alarm signal: from that moment on, it was known that all forces had to be thrown into the battle. So, *Mars Attacks* short-circuited the unions a little, by calling for what we had been waiting for months: a renewable strike, until the withdrawal of the programme decree. The unions were faced with an ultimatum – and they decided to follow. They filed a strike notice for every day until 27 May, and when the parliamentary opposition obtained a postponement of the vote, it was extended until the holidays, and even to the beginning of the school year.

This is where we could see a new form of complementarity emerge between *Mars Attacks* and the unions. The latter cover the movement with their financial resources (daily allowances, transport reimbursement and so on) and continue to try to negotiate with the government. *Mars Attacks* gladly lets them do this work, and is content to build the mobilization, around a simple demand: the withdrawal of the reform, and with it the resignation of the ministers who support it, Valérie Glatigny (Minister of Compulsory Education) and Élisabeth Degryse (Minister-President of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, and Minister of Higher Education). But in concrete terms, it is *Mars Attacks* that sets the agenda.

The collective also showed intelligent flexibility and attention to the new control techniques that were emerging here and there. For example, it is in the region of Verviers and Liège that the strike has started best, thanks to a very effective model of mutual aid between schools, with daily calls to reinforce this or that picket; *Mars Attacks* quickly analysed this operation and generalized it. The strike has taken on a rotating model to last in the long term: every day, the teachers who have the most hours go on strike, while those who have only a few hours give them quickly, before joining the picket line. And in schools where the management has a repressive attitude, teachers from other schools are called in to organize actions while protecting themselves from reprisals. Soon enough, the mobilization spread to students and even parents, with the founding of *Students Attacks* and *Parents Attacks*. The students have begun to play a role in the organisation of pickets – which is very rare in Belgium, which does not have the tradition of blockades that can be found, for example, in France.

And we come to this famous week of June 1st...

As we have said, the vote on the programme decree was initially scheduled for 27 May, then was postponed following an appeal by the opposition. On Monday 1 June, the government announced a forced passage, setting the date for the vote on Thursday 4 June – freeing itself from the deadlines provided for by parliamentary rules in a completely unprecedented way. Clearly, the objective was to short-circuit any protest, since this delay did not even leave us time to ask for permission for a demonstration.

On the union side, the tactic initially chosen was to call on teachers to join a march that was already planned (and therefore authorized) that Thursday, in the morning, for the health sector – and whose message was in fact

broadened. For its part, *Mars Attacks* called for an afternoon rally around the Parliament, despite the lack of authorisation and the fact that, in any case, the streets concerned are part of the “neutral zone”, the part of Brussels where all demonstrations are banned. Quite quickly, several union leaders relayed this call with bated breath, inviting the affiliates to “determine where [their] conscience dictates [them] to go” and other cryptic phrases, without however taking the risk of explicit support.

We knew there would be a lot of people. What we did not expect was the exceptional mobilization of young people, who completely overwhelmed the movement in the early morning. Very early on, clashes took place. In many ways, this day represented an unprecedented acceleration of the politicization of the movement, in the face of the shock of a particularly savage repression, which primarily targeted young people of colour. But it was also a day with sublime images, especially when the teachers made cordons in front of the police to protect their students. A powerful solidarity has been put in place, with the emergency opening of care places to take care of injured or shocked people.

Parliamentary debates continued throughout the night, and the vote took place in the early hours of the morning. Many of us didn't sleep. Personally, I had a union meeting scheduled for the next day at 9:30 a.m., and some people had come more than an hour early, without even a little nap, out of a need to be together. While a few union leaders vaguely tried to maintain the items on the agenda, which had been set 15 days before, the meeting quickly became a space for exchange between people deeply shocked by the events – including bureaucrats. I used this space to call on the CSC to put its apparatus at the service of supporting the hundreds of young people arrested, which was done without encountering opposition.

But during the meeting, we started receiving messages, warning us that the riots were starting again. And not only in Brussels: in Namur, the mobilization had grown to such an extent that all schools were closed as a preventive measure. And if young people were now clearly leading the movement, collectives such as *Mars Attacks*, *École en lutte*, *la Gauche anticapitaliste* and even the unions quickly put their forces into organizing solidarity in the face of repression – with, of course, nuances between some adults who support young people in their autonomy and others who have adopted a more paternalistic attitude. but who all converged in the condemnation of police brutality. On Friday and throughout the weekend, then more sparsely since then, we have seen the same images, with quasi-scenes of war in Brussels and in several cities in Wallonia.

How has the arrival of youth in the foreground change the nature of the movement?

The narrative has broadened. The students were already in solidarity with the teachers' demands: my own daughter, in her school, has known for several months that several of her teachers will probably be forced to leave the school next year. For the elderly and for higher education students, the anger is also obviously crystallizing over the increase in the tuition fee (university registration fees), which goes from €300 to €1,200 for some studies. But what also attracts attention is the contrast between this access to education, which is becoming clogged, and militarization, which is now the path in which young people from the popular classes are invited to throw themselves with enthusiasm. Since last year, all teenagers at 17 have been receiving a letter inviting them to join the army, with promises of high pay and job security. In some schools, students are now prepared for military careers as early as 15 years old. These themes came up very often in the slogans, showing that the movement was now asking a much deeper question: what kind of society are we offering to our children?

Until 4 June, we were quite worried that the vote on the programme decree would lead to the movement running out of steam. But, clearly, after that day, it took on a new dimension, and only got bigger.

From your point of view, what are the perspectives that the mobilization must give itself at this stage?

Today, my main fear is that we will rely on young people to lead the fight. The scheme adopted from 4 June, where they go to the front and adults support them in the second line, cannot be viable for very long.

Then there is the question of revitalizing the fight in other sectors. The next two dates of mobilization planned, excluding education, are 22 June, at the initiative of public services, and 23 June, for commerce. These are two areas with which convergences are easy: public services, obviously because the intersection is wide, even if not all schools depend on them, and commerce because the trade union federations concerned are very militant, and already very supportive of our struggle. Teachers will therefore be present, and our struggle will probably also be highlighted. But ideally, transport, for example, should go on strike in solidarity: if classes can't take place because children can't get there, then teachers can earn a day where their salaries are not taken away, which can greatly help us to hold on.

Finally, the crucial issue today is that of exams. In addition to the pressure to return to the classrooms, these cannot be held in an equitable way anyway, since many students have had almost no classes for weeks. The watchword of *Mars Attacks* is disobedience, with a refusal to encode grades. Some schools have already announced that they are cancelling all tests; and in recent days, the unions have issued a statement calling on all schools to follow their example.

For the future, we have planned to be mobilized throughout the summer, even if the holidays will necessarily imply a temporary slowdown. The unions have already filed strike notices as soon as classes resume, and if the reform is not withdrawn by then, the objective is clearly that the start of the school year does not take place. This situation is clearly a game changer compared to everything that the social mobilizations have shown since the elections. Until now, our great weakness was the absence of a plan of struggle and concrete perspectives: we went into action for a big day of strike, then we waited for the union leaderships to announce a new date, one or two months later. Now, as far as teaching is concerned, there is a plan, at least until September, and the determination to follow it. I am confident: teachers will not accept another defeat, and this mobilization has awakened something in the youth – an ardent, and more than legitimate, desire to win another future.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint**.

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[1] Historically, Belgian trades unionism has been divided into two big confederations: the “greens”, that is the Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens (CSC), and the “reds”, the Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique (FGTB), to which the Centrale Générale des Services Publics (CGSP) is affiliated. If the former is historically Christian Democratic and the second Socialist, the passing of time has largely blurred these lines, and in many sectors the greens are more to the left than the reds.