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Belgium

# **Between an upsurge in mobilisation and a retreat in feminist strikes, how can we organise to win?**

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**This year's feminist demonstration in Brussels, Belgium on 8 March 2025 was once again a great success. Although the press only reported the police estimate (10,000 people), the reality must have been closer to the turnout for the trade union demonstration on 13 January (30,000 people), as the loop around the central station was quickly saturated. The Belgian feminist movement is thus demonstrating that it is still a mobilising force following its revival over the last seven years.**

However, it is still struggling to make a qualitative leap that will enable it to move beyond mobilisations which, while impressive and motivating, remain one-off and symbolic. Faced with the serious challenges of the current period, it is vital that social resistance manages to move up a gear to ensure that Arizona falls as soon as possible, thereby putting a stop to social and ecological destruction. [\[1\]](#) And the feminist movement, building on its strengths, certainly has an important role to play in this.

## **Legitimacy won**

Now, despite a slowdown during the Covid period, 8 March in Belgium is systematically synonymous with the 'feminist strike'. The success of successive editions has gradually prompted union leaderships to commit to covering 8 March actions with strike notice, which was not done until 2019. However, the principle is being applied mechanically: by simply giving notice for this symbolic date alone (even if it falls on a Saturday or Sunday) and without investing in any significant mobilisation to make the strike a success. Even today, trade unions mainly mobilise for 8 March around their own campaigns, decided and run internally (on the pay gap, pensions, work-life balance and so on), which generally end with a symbolic action on 8 March, usually in conjunction with the World March of Women (WMW).

The feminist strike on 8 March and the demonstration against violence on 25 November have become essential days of mobilisation, attracting ever-growing numbers of people. However, to date, the feminist strike in Belgium has never managed to match the scale of the feminist strikes in Spain or Switzerland (where feminists organised this strike on 14 June, with up to 300,000 people mobilising across the country). Collaboration with the WMW and its more institutionalised components, in particular the trade unions, remains complicated. But the rivalry and sense of competition, which were very strong in the early years, have gradually given way to a form of complementarity, with the WMW retaining responsibility for the logistical organisation of the community village and the demonstration, and the C8M continuing to mobilise young feminists through assemblies, 'papotes' workshops, collages and leafleting. In terms of analysis and demands, the two initiatives are largely similar, although the C8M is more concerned with building an inclusive feminism that defends the rights of gender minorities.

## **Strike missed the mark, but was encouraging**

Every year, in the run-up to 8 March, members of local C8M collectives meet up at intervals within the national C8M, but without a clear mandate and through fairly random coordination. This year in particular, the national C8M adopted a *modus operandi*, demands and ambitions very similar to those of the WMW, with less frequent meetings aimed primarily at union officials, and little effort made to extend invitations to meetings to other players in the feminist movement. The demands were more 'mainstream', avoiding, for example, tackling the ignominy of migration policies

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or the danger of repressive security policies. While the watchword remained the call for a 'feminist strike', the unions' desire to limit the strike call to 8 March, with a single day's notice for Saturday, was not called into question. The national C8M was content to call for the demonstration and the feminist village on Saturday, even if this meant neutralising the strike, since many employees do not work at weekends. These few points of criticism are not exhaustive and must form part of a wider reflection on the need for the broadest possible democracy within the feminist movement, a task that we will be carrying out at a later date.

Fortunately, the Brussels C8M mobilised around demands that were more commensurate with the issues at stake, clearly establishing the links with the Arizona programme, the extreme drift to the right of the political landscape, international solidarity and the need to link feminist demands and actions to the trade union action plan to be strengthened with a view to bringing down the government. With this in mind, the C8M Brussels tried to convince the trade unions to put forward a second day of notice on a weekday, notably through a bilingual petition that gathered nearly a thousand signatures. Unfortunately, these attempts failed.

The union leaders preferred to keep their own routine for 8 March, isolated from the other union actions planned against Arizona. These were being drawn up in a blur, which made it difficult for the unions to take a position on a possible sectoral strike notice on 7 March. The unions were already reluctant in principle and, in this context, preferred to concentrate their efforts on the industrial action organised against Arizona.

On Friday 7 March, the C8M Brussels nevertheless organised a series of symbolic actions by 'grévibus' and bicycle, with the support of Commune Colère. This initiative, which was less well attended than in other years due to the absence of union notice, nevertheless enabled us to highlight and link up the struggles of students at ULB and La Cambre, workers in childcare, medical centres and CPAS, single mothers and undocumented women.

It was also an opportunity to show international solidarity with women in Iran, Palestine and the Congo. But it was clearly a missed opportunity to strengthen the trade union action plan by building on a cross-industry feminist strike that could have focused on the right-wing governments' attacks on women's rights at every level (working conditions, income and benefits, abortion, violence, reproductive work and so on), and served as a moment of mobilisation for the general strike on 31 March.

On Friday 7 March, ULB students also organised a student strike and mobilisation on their campus. As in previous years, they were present from the early hours of the morning to blockade the Solbosch campus and raise student awareness of the reasons for the strike. Despite the difficulties, the blockade lasted several hours, allowing for speeches and testimonies, including that of a member of Jeunes anticapitalistes, who were active on the campus and in organising this mobilisation. However, this day of struggle was also marked by a number of worrying events. In the morning, the ULB threatened to cut the chains, which finally led to the blockade of the buildings being lifted, illustrating once again the way in which the institution is trying to break up student movements and stifle any protest. In an even more serious incident, two of our fellow students were physically and verbally assaulted by a man who made misogynistic comments. Despite these obstacles, the mobilisation showed the strength of student solidarity: during a raid on the auditorium, they persuaded an entire class and its teacher to join the picket line and give a lesson, thereby socialising knowledge.

On Saturday 8 March, because of the strike notice given on a day when many women were not working and the absence of any real mobilisation within most of the central organisations, it was mainly women trade workers who were able to go on strike to organise union action in Brussels in the morning with the Centrale nationale des employés, and the support of C8M Bruxelles and Commune Colère. Thanks to this action, a few dozen people were able to meet workers from the shops on Rue Neuve and City 2 in a friendly and combative atmosphere. We were able to discuss the strike of 8 March, but also to mobilise for the general strike on 31 March. These exchanges helped to strengthen links with workers in the sector and to discuss the threats facing them, particularly in the face of

Arizona. The group of activists then formed a small procession from the Place de la Monnaie to the Place de l'Albertine to join the associative village.

While the 'feminist strike' as such was disappointing in the circumstances, the national demonstration in Brussels on Saturday 8th March was a real success, at least in terms of turnout. Nearly 30,000 people took to the streets of Brussels under a blazing sun: all the associations in the sector (Vie Féminine, the World March of Women, Furia, Greenpeace, Abortion Rights, etc.), the trade unions (FGTB, CSC, CGSP, CNE, Metallos), international solidarity groups (Femmes, Vie, Liberté, activists in solidarity with Palestine or the Congo, etc.), left-wing organisations (PTB, PSL, Gauche anticapitaliste and so on) made up a dynamic procession, reminiscent of the strength of the demonstration on 8 March 2019.

However, the combativeness of the march contrasted sharply with the weakness of the political content: the hegemonic 'We are strong, proud, feminist, radical and angry', naively declamatory at a time when the far right is advancing all over the world, or the 'solidarity with women all over the world', essential but lacking in substance, invaded a space marked by the absence of any statement against Arizona, or any call for a strike on 31 March. The demonstration gave the impression of a strange 'business as usual', at a time when the political situation in Belgium and elsewhere is one of the most worrying for women and gender minorities for several decades.

It's also worth noting the unabashed presence of several MR figures with placards at the demonstration. [\[2\]](#) Pointing the finger at their hypocrisy and anti-feminism (notably through their presence in the Arizona government and the party's extreme right-wing tendencies), several demonstrators chanted slogans aimed at marginalising them and inviting them to leave the demonstration, to which they were not welcome. Far from being insignificant, their presence seems to be rooted in the same strategy as the far right and in particular the femino-nationalist collective Nemesis in France: coming to demonstrations in order to provoke reactions, and using these reactions to create controversy. As a matter of fact, the MR seized on this event to position themselves as victims, even though the videos show physical violence on their part towards young demonstrators, some of whom were minors. Sophie Rohonyi (DéFI) acknowledged that the presence of the MR was a provocation, but was quick to 'condemn the violence', while Marie Lecoq (Ecolo) had not a word to say against the MR presence, and the other political parties did not even react. For us, however, the message is clear: the MR has no business taking part in a feminist demonstration!

While the Brussels demonstration was the high point of the mobilisation, other actions were also organised elsewhere in the country on 7 and 8 March. In Liège, after a rally with speeches organised on Friday by the university's feminist circle, the feminist association and trade union sector again this year organised an associative village and a cycloparade on Saturday, which drew around 500 people. Commune Colère, which organised a block in the cycloparade, followed up with a rally of around fifty people in front of the MR offices to denounce Arizona's anti-women's rights programme. In Namur, the Collecti.e.f 8 mars also mobilised around 500 people on Saturday in a fairly young procession, focusing in particular on issues of international solidarity (Palestine, Congo). In Mons, a demonstration of around 250 people was organised on 7 March by the local feminist network. The action was preceded by an associative village on the Mons university campus. Other major demonstrations took place in other cities, notably in Flanders, with 1,000 people in Antwerp, 2,300 in Ghent and 200 in Leuven, testifying to the decentralisation of the movement and its potential for mobilisation beyond the capital.

## Feminists grapple with new world disorder

8 March 2025 takes place in an alarming international political context, marked by the rise of far-right forces in many countries, including in the capitalist heartland. Where they have not (yet) succeeded in seizing power through the ballot box, these organisations often represent the main opposition force to the traditional parties, which are increasingly losing legitimacy as a result of the never-ending crisis of neo-liberalism, the harmful effects of which

have been particularly felt by the working classes since the crisis of 2008; a crisis that no political formation today seems able to curb with the old austerity recipes. Presenting itself as a way out of this turbulence, the far right is clearly a mortal danger for women, gender minorities and our social camp as a whole, and it is important that the feminist movement assumes a major opposition role vis-à-vis these forces.

The far right has two strategies for dealing with the feminist movement: on the one hand, outspoken opposition, marked by a radical denunciation of 'wokism' or 'neo-feminism'. These are said to destabilise traditional gender roles and threaten our social model. This strategy is often based on a masculinist discourse, which exalts masculine values that are supposedly in danger, and which can be found in an almost chemically pure form in the speeches of Trump, Musk, Javier Milei and their court. On the other hand, in countries where the feminist movement has succeeded in stabilising a certain institutional base and gaining deep legitimacy in the public debate, the far right takes a different path, adopting a discourse that is willingly femino-nationalist, postulating an equality that has already been achieved in Western societies, and that is to be defended against immigrant populations from other regions of the world (often of 'Muslim tradition' or assimilated as such), in which patriarchy still exists. Another attempt, complementary to the previous one, to recuperate feminism within a radicalising right-wing movement, which tries to merge feminist struggles into a neoliberal and meritocratic discourse: the objective of feminism would then be for women to become capitalists like men (a discourse frequently heard from the mouths of elected members of the MR, for example). The feminist movement should now be able to mobilise, in conjunction with all the sections of society attacked by these political forces (racialised people, trade unions and so on), to form a social force capable of consigning the far right to the dustbin of history!

While the rise of the far right is one of the most striking phenomena of the period, it is not the only one. Capitalism's structural crisis of accumulation is the economic backdrop against which profound (geo)political instability is unfolding. In addition to the increasingly tangible ecological disasters and the establishment of authoritarian regimes that attack democratic and social rights, it is of course the issue of war that is dominating the current situation. The reconfiguration of the international balance of power is giving way to a new division of spheres of influence between empires. With profit rates running out of steam, fuelling a sharpening of conflict between the great powers, the United States, Russia and China are adopting a strategy aimed at vassalising neighbouring countries, with the objective of obtaining by force the resources needed to boost accumulation, as well as a degree of military grandeur that would strengthen their position on the international chessboard, in an era marked by the end of 'happy globalisation'. From this point of view, war is one means among others of ensuring imperialist expansionism, to the detriment of the populations of neighbouring countries, and in particular women and children, who are often the first victims of armed conflict.

In this situation, it is crucial for the feminist movement to be able to raise its voice in defence of the peoples fighting against all forms of imperialism, and to reaffirm the need for concrete international solidarity, not only through an anti-militarist stance, but also by linking up with feminist organisations on the ground fighting against military invasions. The anti-war feminism that we are calling for must not close its eyes to the need to give ourselves the material means to defend ourselves against imperialist invasions, while refusing to give in to the neoliberal militarist sirens that offer no prospects for our social camp. The guidelines for an independent policy on the military question, which is genuinely anti-capitalist and internationalist, urgently need to be discussed within the feminist movement today.

## Make the 31 March strike a success and feminise it

The success of the demonstration in Brussels on 8 March shows that the mobilisation potential of the women's movement is intact. The motivation and strength are still there. But the strategic and political prospects for the

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women's movement in Belgium remain weak. The attacks by the right and the far right provide an opportunity to emphasise once again that the rights of women and gender minorities are under huge threat and that a feminist response is needed to turn the tide.

While this sentiment seems to be widely shared in feminist circles, the conclusions that could be drawn from it, in favour of building a political message and a strategy for change, are struggling to materialise. Yet the fall of Arizona is the only viable prospect for defending women's rights and halting social and ecological destruction. It is essential to draw up today a programme for a clear break, supported by all the components of the social and trade union movements, which can serve as a basis for building a political alternative capable of defeating the right and the far right.

The cross-industry strike on 31 March is the next step in building resistance and making progress in this direction. While at the time of writing it is difficult to predict the scale of the mobilisation, it is certain that all sectors will be affected by trade union action. Taking a feminist approach to this day would make up for the missed opportunity on 8 March, by demonstrating the particular impact of right-wing government measures on women's rights, at work and beyond, and by supporting the need to invest in common goods, the public and non-market sectors, the prevention of all forms of violence and international solidarity. It is in this spirit that C8M Brussels is planning to organise a new feminist 'grévibus' to rally the pickets of different feminist sectors on 31 March, an initiative that we support and call on to be multiplied in other cities. For this initiative to have a lasting impact, it must be linked to the building of fronts of resistance and putting pressure on the trade union movement to build an action plan determined to bring down Arizona as quickly as possible. To make the qualitative leap it lacks, the feminist movement would certainly benefit from investing in a unitary framework like the one now being proposed by Commune Colère. And if we are to beat the right and the far right, the resistance we need to build would be greatly strengthened by the contribution of the feminist movement.

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[1] The current ruling coalition in Belgium is known as "Arizona" as the colours of the constituent parties resemble those of the flag of the US state.

[2] The Mouvement Réformateur is a historically centre-right Francophone party.