



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Belgians protest austerity measures, 2011-2012

02 December

2011

to: 31 January

2012

Country: Belgium

Location City/State/Province: Brussels

Goals:

The goals of this case were to prevent the Belgian government from implementing austerity measures, in particular raising the minimum age of retirement

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 019. Wearing of symbols › Union workers wore the colors of the three main Belgian unions.
- 038. Marches › Tens of thousands of Belgians marched to the capital in Brussels to voice their opposition to austerity measures.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Belgian citizens protested in Brussels against upcoming austerity measures.

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 085. Merchants' "general strike" › Stores across Belgium shut down in protest of the austerity measures.
- 106. Industry strike › Transportation workers shut down their services for 24 hours.

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 037. Singing › Protestors outside of Audi sang and danced.
- 038. Marches › Protestors blocked several highways going out of and coming into the city
- 085. Merchants' "general strike" › Stores across Belgium shut down in protest of the austerity measures.
- 097. Protest strike › Government buildings and schools were closed
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Citizens in Belgium who are protesting incurring the cost of the economic collapse of 2008
- government workers
- industrial workers
- postal office workers.
- school workers
- transportation workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Claude Rolin (general secretary of the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, one of the three main organizations behind the strike), Belgian unions

Partners:

Metal workers, teachers, transportation workers, builders, brewing industry workers.

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Belgian unions
- Confederation of Christian Trade Unions
- Metal workers
- Teachers
- brewing industry workers
- builders

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Transportation workers

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 10 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Socialist Prime Minister Elio di Rupo, Budget Minister Olivier Castel

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The austerity measures continued, as did the summit.

On 2 December 2011, tens of thousands of Belgian citizens took to the streets in the capital, Brussels, to protest the austerity measures taken by the then-incoming government. The new socialist prime minister was going to be sworn in the week after this protest to try and fix the financial crisis that had left Belgium without a government for 19 months. The government needed to save 11.3 billion euros in the year of 2012 to decrease its budget deficit below the EU limit of 3% of gross domestic product (GDP). The potential cuts included reducing unemployment benefits, limited early retirement, and reducing spending in the public sector. One of the largest and most controversial effects of these measures was the raise in retirement age. Formerly, Belgium citizens were able to retire at the age of 55 for full pension. The new austerity plan would change the retirement age to 65. It was this change that incited citizens to protest.

These citizens marched on 2 December 2011 to the capital to voice their opposition to these cuts. Included in the demonstration were metal workers, public service employees, brewing industry workers, builders, and teachers. Protestors dressed as Belgian Socialist leader Eliio Di Rupo, donning wigs and giant bow ties. Additionally, these protestors wore green, red, and blue—the colors of the three main Belgian unions.

The protests on 2 December 2011 did not convince the government to stop with its austerity measures. In escalation, on 20 December 2011, the public sector unions called for a one-day general strike to begin two days later.

As planned, on 22 December 2011, Belgian workers in the public transport, schools, hospitals, and government buildings began their strike against the pension reforms. The Belgian rail system stopped operating late during the night before, and other forms of public services, such as buses and the metro, shut down for the 24-hour strike. The strike was the second show of union opposition to the government's austerity cuts. The strikers viewed the strike as a success because it united union members in anger and determination.

Still, the government continued with its austerity measures.

The European Union (EU) was to host a summit meeting on the euro zone crisis at the end of January 2012. The purpose of the summit was to discuss ways to boost Belgium's economic growth and increase job opportunities. The government had approved an austerity package that would save Belgium \$11.3 billion euros of its state budget, thus avoiding an EU fine. On 17 January 2012, trade unions called for a second general strike and protests during the summit. Although this advanced warning allowed

EU members to consider rescheduling the summit, they decided to continue as planned and hold it on 30 January 2012.

Three main organizations, including the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, joined together to organize this 24-hour strike, scheduled to overlap with the summit. On 30 January 2012, private and public sector workers across Belgium stopped work. The strike brought Belgium to a near standstill on the day that EU leaders were to meet in Brussels for the summit.

Actions began at approximately 2:00 AM on 30 January 2012, when rail workers stopped trains. Then, at 3:00 AM, workers shut down tram, subway, and bus services. There were no domestic or international rail services. Public transportation was stilled to a halt.

At 6:00 AM, dock workers stopped working and closed down the terminals at the Port of Antwerp, a decision that cost the port 1 million euros in losses in added value every hour.

Production halted at Audi and Volvo car company factories. Throughout the day, workers held protests outside of an Audi car plant, dancing and drumming around a fire outside.

In addition, workers protested at airlines. Although pilots were angry about the austerity measures, only 10% of flights were cancelled or affected by the 24-hour strike.

Protestors blocked highways and crossings into Germany and Luxembourg and established road blockades to block industrial zones and stall the country's production. Protestors used flares, flags, and whistles to slow down and disrupt traffic on the roads. Additionally, snow slowed down transportation. Because of all of these effects on transportation, many EU leaders had to fly into a military air base 20 miles from the capital out of a fear that strikers would shut down the international airport. These leaders did this so that the summit could continue on despite the strike.

The strike extended beyond transportations, as many schools, government offices, factories, and supermarkets shut down for the 24-hour stoppage, too. Employees at a Coca-Cola factory walked off of their job. Some citizens took the streets to protest. During the day, one man dressed as Belgian Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo and walked with a megaphone as a part of a symbolic strike organized by the CSC Christian Union of Mons-La Louviere in front of Di Rupo's residence in Mons.

These actions, though, had a minimal impact on the summit. Austerity measures continued, as did the summit. And, the strike angered many citizens who were frustrated by the lack of public transportation. A public survey showed that only 21% of the population supported the strike. Although the strike was able to shut down Belgium for the day and send a message, the government did not listen to this message. The summit continued largely undisturbed and the Belgium government kept seeking to extend austerity measures. The campaign, as a whole, was unable to stop the Belgium government from its budget cuts. While this campaign seemed to end as austerity measures were implemented after January 2012, Belgians later resumed protests as the government continued to implement new measures.

Research Notes

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Aileen Eisenberg and John Pontillo, 14/04/2013

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