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France/Belgium

The strike as a tool of feminist struggle: the example of Vertbaudet

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On 20 March, a long strike began for workers, very largely women, at the Vertbaudet enterprise in northern France, which produces childcare products. The reason for the strike was the 2023 wage agreement, which did not provide for any increase, despite a context of inflation which was depreciating salaries, which in the company oscillate around 1300 euros net per month. A struggle then began between 72 employees of the warehouse, mostly women, and an inflexible management.

It was finally at the end of 75 days of strike, on the evening of Friday 2 June, that an agreement was reached: the strikers were victorious and the management acceded to their demands, namely an increase in wages (from 90 to 140 euros per month, depending on seniority), the hiring of 30 temporary workers on permanent contracts and no prosecution of the workers who had been on strike.

Two and a half months of struggle

Despite often more than ten years of service for most of the employees working for Vertbaudet, it was for the first time, on March 20, that they had gone on strike. Faced with a wage agreement that provided for a "0% per cent increase", simply granting a bonus of 650 euros (which would have had no impact on the calculation of pensions), the workers, who spend the day standing up, testing, preparing and packing pushchairs and sleeping bags ordered online, stopped work to demand a wage increase of 150 euros net, and the hiring of temporary workers to relieve the enormous workload.

Between a management that did not shrink from any dirty tricks to attack the strike (intimidation and threats of dismissal, instrumentalization of non-striking employees to denounce striking workers who would supposedly "tarnish" the image of the company, etc.) and the police violence that marked the movement (violent dismantling of the picket line, which led to a striker being taken to the accident and emergency service, assault on a trade unionist outside her home by plainclothes police), the strikers did not give up and managed to impose a real relationship of forces that ended up forcing the management to crack.

The strike was also marked by the arrival on the picket line of Sophie Binet, the newly elected General Secretary of the CGT, thus giving a wider echo to the struggle of the workers. This support was strengthened in particular through the organization of a demonstration in Paris on 23 May, during which Binet said she wanted to "nationalize" the conflict if no agreement was reached by the leadership by May 26, thus announcing that she could launch the entire CGT into battle. A threat that seems to have played a role, since Vertbaudet announced a few days later the conclusion of an agreement that acceded to the demands of the strikers.

An important feminist victory

As Sophie Binet (who spoke about the struggle of women for economic independence) rightly pointed out, as did the collective behind the tribune in support of the strike published on 23 May in *Le Monde*, this struggle is also a feminist issue. The low wages of the workers, despite decades of seniority, and the contempt of the management in the face of the demands of the strikers are inseparable from the fact that the workers employed by the company are mostly women. However, as many feminist studies have already shown, the gendered organization of work does not only

lead to symbolic sexist discrimination, but also makes women workers economically precarious: whether through the wage devaluation of jobs considered "female", or through the double working day that often forces women into part-time work, they find themselves economically dominated, and often dependent on a partner's salary to survive.

Concerning the Vertbaudet struggle, the historian Fanny Gallot, a specialist in gender inequalities in working conditions, explained to *Médiapart*: "In these professions, the organization of work is based on the idea that women have no skills, that being meticulous is natural for them and is only an extension of their role as mothers. They are unqualified, their professional skills are considered as being simply natural, and, as a result, they are underpaid."

However, this precariousness of so-called female jobs has proved all the more unbearable for working women as inflation has caused the cost of living to skyrocket. It is therefore not insignificant that many of the strikers are single mothers, in a particularly precarious situation, whose salaries no longer enabled them to survive or take proper care of their children. If the success of the Vertbaudet strike is a victory for the working class, it is also a feminist victory, and it recalls, even though the circumstances were different, the success of the domestic workers of the Ibis-Batignolles hotel in Paris who, after 22 months of struggle, including eight months on strike, had managed to make the giant Accor company give way.

The strike as a tool of feminist struggle

If we support every year the strikes of March 8, driven by the international feminist strike movement, and relayed in Belgium by the March 8 Collective, we always recall the need for the feminist movement not to be satisfied with one-off actions, but to build throughout the year a relationship of forces in order to give substance to feminist demands. With their 75 days of strike, crowned by a resounding victory, the workers of Vertbaudet give us an important lesson in the power of the strike to defend our rights.

In a context where the violence of neoliberalism seems to lock down social struggles, and where the capitalist class is determined to wage war on workers, the strikers of Vertbaudet have shown by their unflinching determination that it is only collectively that we can make the employers' powers waver, and that the strike remains an important means of struggle to make our demands heard. This victory must not be an end, but only a beginning, and give strength to other sectors to use the weapon of the strike to put forward feminist demands in the struggles for better working conditions.

The story of the struggle at Vertbaudet obviously echoes in Belgium the mobilization of the employees of Delhaize, women and men, against the restructuring plan announced on 7 March by the management of the company. Similar mechanisms can be observed in both cases: cashiers are mostly women and also suffer from having their jobs de-qualified, viewed with contempt and low paid. At the same time, they are also at the forefront of this struggle against the voracity of the management.

Obviously, the multiple legal attacks on the movement, such as the ordinances prohibiting picketing, make it more difficult to strike. But another lesson of Vertbaudet is the importance of giving the movement a mass character, going beyond the workers of the company itself and demonstrating a more general solidarity. It is thanks in particular to the support of the CGT and the demonstration on 23 May that the strikers could build the relationship of forces that enabled them to win. In the same way, the struggle at Delhaize must not be limited to the workers of the company, but obtain the widest support of all the other sectors in struggle to establish the relationship of forces.

Mark the date of 16 June for the "Tribunal of political courage"

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That the strike is a tool of feminist struggle is also shown by the movement initiated by the League of Domestic Workers, organized around the Brussels MOC (Christian Workers' Movement), which has been bringing together undocumented workers for several years to support them in their demands for legal access to work, the possibility of filing complaints in case of abuse and violence, as well as access to Actiris training. On 16 June 2022, International Domestic Work Day, League workers went on strike (despite the difficulty of doing so when you do not have papers) in order to put forward these demands and challenge the political world during a "Parliament of domestic workers".

On 16 June 2023, they will be on strike again, and present at the Place Poelaert in Brussels for a "tribunal of political courage", in order to judge the lack of political courage of the Brussels Ministry of Employment, represented by Bernard Clerfayt, regarding the working conditions of undocumented workers. We will be there with the Anti-capitalist Feminists, and we look forward to seeing you for this important event, which will be an opportunity to hear the testimonies of domestic workers and support their struggle.

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Translated by *International Viewpoint* from [Gauche Anticapitaliste](#).

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