

The Maritime Executive

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Shipping Halted in Antwerp as Unions Renew Strikes Against Government



Workers staged another day of strikes in Belgium to protest the government's austerity plan (FGTB/Facebook)

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The Port of Antwerp is reporting that disruptions caused by a strike against the government have continued to mount today with no ocean or inland ships moving from the port which emerged last month as the busiest in Europe. Port officials are warning that the action will continue till Wednesday morning, and then they expect at least one to two days to clear up the mounting backlog.

The national authorities and the Port of Antwerp—Bruges began preparations on Monday afternoon, April 28, in order to bring the port traffic to an orderly stop. They said 25 ships were waiting to depart with another 31 waiting to enter, but expected that all traffic would be halted. The strike began Monday evening at 1930 and will continue till 0730 on Wednesday.

As of Tuesday afternoon, Antwerp-Bruges is reporting that a total of 74 ships are now waiting. In Antwerp, 38 vessels were unable to depart while on the North Sea, 36 vessels are waiting, all heading for Antwerp. Ships are unable to pass the lock at Scheldt, but unlike the [strike last month](#), the unions are not stopping work in the other main seaport of Zeebrugge.

“The general strike of March 31 was a success, but the measures proposed by the government remain unpalatable,” said FGTB, one of Belgium’s unions and organizers of today’s stoppage along with the AVC. “We must keep up the pressure and push for change.”

Today’s actions were focused on Antwerp and Brussels as well as regional centers around the country including Ghent. In addition to stopping vessel movements at the Port of Antwerp, the strikes

stopped most air traffic. All departures are again suspended at Brussels Airport as well as more than half the arrivals.

The unions continue to protest planned changes by the new coalition government that center on pensions, unemployment benefits, and budget cuts to the public service sector. AVC issued a list of demands saying workers are entitled to free and fair wage negotiations, union consultations when overnight, Sunday or overtime hours are required, and that there should be better flexibility for workers to have family time. The unions are calling for a minimum of five weeks of legal holiday for everyone.

Media reports indicate that at least 100 ships a day are using the port for access to the inland routes. During the strike at the end of March, the Port of Antwerp-Bruges estimated the backlog at over 50 ships, but since then port data showed Antwerp had become the [busiest container port](#) in Europe. It surpassed Rotterdam in total volume during March.

While the unions are promising to resume work on Wednesday, April 30, the following day, May Day (May 1) is a national holiday in Belgium. The unions have called for another day of rallies as they continue to press the coalition government to relent on its planned cuts.