

Strike wave envelops Greece

Robert Stevens
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Over the past month hundreds of thousands of workers in Greece have taken strike action to demand increased pay and benefits. The strikes have been called by a number of the main Greek trade unions and have been centred mainly on the capital city of Athens.

On October 6, thousands of public sector workers held anti-government protests to demand pay increases. Striking workers and their supporters marched through central Athens. The industrial action included the participation of rubbish collectors, hospital workers, doctors, teachers, professors and judges.

Academic staff at universities also joined the day of action, as did doctors in nearby Piraeus and tourist workers—leading to the closure of a number of tourist sites such as the Acropolis in Athens and the palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. Delegations of police officers also participated in the strike.

The following day taxi drivers held a 48-hour strike to continue their campaign against government demands that they distribute printed receipts ahead of the 2004 Athens Olympics. There are some 14,000 drivers employed in or around Athens and Piraeus who have already held several previous strikes, including a two-day strike on September 18. The drivers' latest strike had the greatest impact on ports and airports.

The workers involved in the strike movement have a number of different demands. Contract workers at tourist sites are demanding permanent staff status while court employees are demanding more pay and better benefits. Civil servants are demanding a pay increase. Firemen and coastguards and the police officers are asking for official recognition of the dangers of their work and that they be paid more on this basis.

Last month the ruling PASOK party government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis issued pay increases to a number of groups of workers in the low-income bands, as part of its 1.7 billion euro budget plans. The measure was seen on the whole as an attempt to bolster some

public support ahead of elections next spring.

At the same time it announced that “privileged” professional workers would not receive pay increases as “there is simply no more to give.” The government stated that this economic decision was due to the nation hosting the Olympics next year.

Government spokesman Christos Protopapas said, “The government has never refused dialogue with unions but has made clear there is no more room for salary raises.”

The announcement only fuelled the strike movement. On October 10, taxi drivers, coastguards, firefighters, doctors and nurses took action, as did some police officers. Violent clashes took place between riot squads and protesting police officers that had blocked the entrance to Greece's finance ministry. Riot police used teargas and pepper spray to clear the entrance, injuring five people: four police officers and one member of the Greek parliament who had joined the protesters.

Defending the action, Greek Public Order Minister Gorges Florid said, “This kind of protest, carried out by armed officers, is tantamount to mutiny. We dealt with the situation appropriately.”

In response, a police union leader said, “This is disgraceful. There was an excessive use of tear gas. If they have any sense of responsibility, the leadership of the Greek police should resign.”

The strike movement continued on October 13 with a number of large protests in Athens supported by many public sector workers, including teachers, local government staff, hospital workers, firemen, coastguards and staff from the culture ministry. Culture Ministry employees at Dion, Vergina and Pella in northern Greece also struck, resulting in the closure of historic sites at these locations.

A number of schools and local government services were closed or affected by the action. Parts of the health system, including outpatient clinics, also closed

during the day. The publication of Greek economic figures was also affected by the action, as the staff involved in their compilation joined the strike.

Acting government spokesman Telemahos Hytiris repeated that the government would not concede to pay demands and called on trade unions and workers to have a “social conscience.” Hytiris added that the economy had already been stretched to the limits and that “We would be happy if we could do something better.”

On October 16, union leaders representing Culture Ministry workers ended the strike following talks that resulted in an agreement over their demands for higher pay and permanent contracts.

The strikes are set to continue, following the announcement by the Federation of Civil Servants that its members will hold national strike action on November 4.



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