

Greece: Sellout of teachers' strike paves way for massive government attacks

John Vassilopoulos
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The union bureaucracy's sellout of the teachers' struggle against low pay and education reforms will pave the way for the government's attack on education and other public services.

On October 30, the unions ordered back to work high school and primary school teachers who started their six-week-long strike on September 18, disrupting the start of the new academic year. As part of winding down the campaign, two one-day strikes were held on November 3 and 9, and general meetings are to be held to "assess" the next stage.

Dimitris Bratis, the leader of the Greek Primary Teachers Federation (DOE), said the teachers had returned to work "for the sake of the children, and not because their demands had been met." He openly sympathised with the government's claim that increasing the proportion of the state budget spent on education would create economic difficulties. Representatives of the Teachers' Federation have met with Deputy National Education and Religious Affairs Minister Georgos Kalos to present their proposals as to how the lost teaching hours will best be replaced.

The teachers are demanding a 45 percent pay increase and a net annual salary of €16,800 (US\$21,600) for new entrants to the profession. Greek teachers are among the lowest paid in Europe, with an annual starting salary of €12,555 (US\$16,160) compared with €37,350 in Germany, €28,819 in the UK and about €17,500 in Italy and France. Other demands include a reduction in class sizes and the maintenance of free public education. There is widespread opposition to chronic under-investment in schools in Greece, which only allocates 4 percent of GDP to education—the lowest proportion in the European Union. Promises by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis's New Democracy administration to increase this to 5 percent have not been fulfilled.

In response to the teachers' demands, the government

proposed a monthly €105 state benefit to be paid in four instalments spread over three years and a wage increase—the economy permitting—of around €17.50 a month. Other demands were referred for assessment to the Economic Ministry with no concrete concessions made. Karamanlis declared, "The Greek economy cannot currently sustain fulfilling the teachers' demands. It is not possible for me to risk Greece's efforts for economic development."

The unions ended the teachers' strike fearing that a wider movement was developing against the government involving civil servants, transport workers, high school and university students and lecturers. The seriousness of the threat was symbolised by the government's decision to reschedule a further parliamentary debate on its educational reforms from November to January on the advice of Greek Minister of Public Order Viron Polidoras. He said it would "pour oil on the fire" and make ineffective the special security measures put in place to prevent November 17—the annual anniversary of the 1974 student uprising against the Colonels' dictatorship—becoming a rallying point for mass discontent.

Alongside the teachers' strike, more than 1,000 schools in Greece were taken over by students, most of them in and around Athens. While their actions were in solidarity with the striking teachers, their demands are centred more on the gross under-funding in schools and against the government's plans to privatise universities. There is also resentment over the government's increase of the entrance requirements for universities, which resulted in 14,000 fewer people going to university this year.

Once the teachers' unions announced their intention to wind down the teachers' strike, the students' National Coordinating Committee recommended local committees end their protests. The school students' occupations were a continuation of the big university demonstrations in the

summer against the government's education reforms. These included the reorganisation of courses to suit big business, amendments to Article 16 of the Greek Constitution guaranteeing free education for all to allow the private sector a greater role, abolition of free course books and restrictions on student representation. The institution of "university asylum," which protects students' rights to unrestricted expression of political views and actions on university campuses and restricts police access, will also be done away with.

Behind the government's stance is pressure to conform to the European Union's strict budget restrictions, a condition of Greece's membership in the European single currency. Greece used false statistics to enter the euro, while its economy is already burdened by the debts that it amassed as a result of the Olympic Games in 2004.

Greece's economy has experienced above-average economic growth over the last decade, but international financial institutions such as the European Bank and International Monetary Fund have warned of problems ahead. The IMF has noted that the current account deficit is now "unsustainable" and must be resolved by 2010, and that a "chronic weakness" has developed in foreign direct investment and credit is mushrooming.

The IMF has told the government that it must cut taxes and limit wages increases, which are "too large to preserve international competitiveness." There must be "relaxation of strong employment legislation and decentralisation of the bargaining system" and the introduction of private sector terms of employment for new state employees. The IMF congratulated the government for its plans to privatise the telephone operator Hellenic Telecomms (OTE) and three banks, but called for more privatisations and the rapid introduction of public-private partnerships.

The Greek working class has shown its readiness to respond to this onslaught by the ruling elite. The teachers' strike has been marked by a high level of militancy, with teachers foregoing a large portion of their pay. At the same time tempers were inflamed by the government's provocative stance, including police attacks on a rally at the end of September.

At the same time, in a recent poll, 74 percent of Greeks said that they consider the teachers' demands fair.

In contrast, the unions have been trying from the start to stifle the strike. Early on in the dispute, Dimitris Bratis appealed to the prime minister to resolve the crisis, saying the situation could be calmed if the government's €105 monthly increase was granted in fewer instalments.

The teachers' unions have a long record of collaborating with the Greek government to bring in reactionary measures. The social democratic PASOK-dominated DOE trade union worked with the previous PASOK administration, most notably in the introduction of flexible working hours for teachers. In addition, the wider trade union movement has tried hard to keep the teachers' strike isolated, with only a few token gestures of solidarity, such as a four-hour stoppage called by the General Confederation of Labour (GSEE) and a 24-hour strike called by the civil servants' union last week.

In April the GSEE agreed on a National General Collective Agreement with the Confederation of Greek Industrialists, which reduced the provisions on employment conditions and social issues such as working time arrangements.

Greece has become an extremely polarised society. Apart from Spain and Portugal, it has the lowest minimum wage in the European Union. Salaries increased by only 2 percent last year, while inflation was 3.5 percent. A study by the Greek Statistical Service showed that, after household expenses have been deducted, the proportion of those classed as poor is 27 percent. According to social anthropologist Giouli Bagietakou, "If family ties in Greece were not so strong, most of these people would have found themselves on the streets unable to meet their needs."

Meanwhile, the proportion of Greeks with annual income over €100,000 has dramatically increased. In 2004, they represented 4.7 percent of the population—up from 3.9 percent in 2003 and 2.7 percent in 2000. In an interview given to the Greek daily *Ta Nea*, economist Panagiotis Lignos said, "In our country two different worlds coexist, completely alien one to the other. On the one side you have the world of unemployment, passivity, of street stalls and consumer loans with the unsustainable instalments. On the other you have a world of luxury hotels, frequent travel to exotic locations and designer clothes."



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