

One-day general strike in Greece

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On December 11-12, a 24-hour general strike paralysed large areas of Greece. Air traffic and shipping were almost brought to a standstill. Many of the Greek islands were cut off from the external world for the duration of the walkout. It was the biggest strike in Greece in more than 10 years.

According to trade union officials, approximately 2.5 million workers supported the strike call—nearly half of all Greek employees. This included sections of workers who are rarely involved in strikes and protests. Among white-collar workers who participated were bank employees, civil servants, attorneys and teachers, leading to the closure of numerous schools, banks and other public facilities.

In medical clinics and hospitals, only urgent cases were treated, as physicians and maintenance personnel followed the strike call. As a result of broad participation by journalists, there was no news on the radio or TV on December 12. On the following day, no newspapers appeared. A large number of pilots and flight crews working for Olympic Airways protested against the planned privatisation of the company. The courts were also closed for two days.

Further 24-hour strikes were announced, which are to include pharmacists, dentists and other medical personnel.

More than 100,000 people took part in rallies in Athens and Thessaloniki. In the capital, bus, tram and underground drivers broke off their strike in order to transport participants to the demonstrations. Many school pupils, college students and pensioners joined in the protests. In Athens, there were clashes with the police, who used tear gas against demonstrators.

The strikes and protests are directed primarily against the programme of pension cuts being advanced by the conservative government headed by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis. The government pension “reform” would increase the number of years an employee must

work to qualify for full benefits under the state pension scheme. The retirement age is presently set at 65.

The government is seeking to amalgamate the separate pension schemes that have previously existed side by side. This seen as a device to lower the general pension level, forcing pensioners and active workers to pick up the tab for those schemes that are in deficit.

Opposition to the pension “reform” already led to strikes at the end of November. Workers at the National Institute for Social Security as well as employees of the private Alpha bank held a two-day strike. Journalists and teachers stopped work for one day a week later.

The pension plans are part of an extensive attack on social benefits that the government unveiled after the elections in September. This includes drastic cuts in the areas of health and education. Recent years have seen one austerity budget after another. Although the country’s total indebtedness was lowered by more than 5 percent, the budget announced in October included further severe cuts.

Students and teachers organised massive protests last year against plans to introduce study fees and partially privatise the universities. For weeks, students demonstrated and occupied the universities.

Commentators spoke of the government facing a decisive confrontation. Union spokesman Efstathios Anestis told the press, “The nationwide strike on Wednesday is a serious test for the government’s reform agenda.”

However, Prime Minister Karamanlis and the New Democrats (Nea Dimokratia—ND) are determined to override all opposition to their policies. Immediately after the strike, they announced that their “reforms” would go forward. Karamanlis insisted there was no alternative to the planned measures.

In the September elections, Karamanlis was able to secure a narrow government majority for his ND party, despite suffering losses and a clear leftward shift

among the voters. The aim of the right-wing Karamanlis government is to smash up what remains of the welfare state and thereby fulfil the demands of the European and international financial establishment. This means keeping the controversial finance minister, Giorgos Alogoskoufis, in his post.

Karamanlis had brought forward the elections in order to obtain a “strong mandate” to implement the planned reforms. However, this was disrupted by the disastrous fires that devastated large parts of the country just weeks before the elections.

The austerity policy of the preceding years, combined with corruption and nepotism, resulted in the fires turning into a tragedy in which thousands of hectares of land and forest burned and thousands of people were robbed of their livelihoods. Quite rightly, people held both the ND and the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), which has ruled Greece for most of the country’s recent history, responsible for the situation.

The two largest trade union federations, GSSE and ADEDY, called on their members to support the strike. Both have a long tradition of collaboration with the country’s political elite. In particular, the unions have close links to PASOK.

Despite the unions’ intermittent recourse to militant action and their announcement of further strikes, they are seeking to evade a direct confrontation with the ND government. In April of last year, for example, the GSSE signed a contract with the Greek employers’ federation that included substantial concessions on work hours and conditions. The DOE union strangled a strike by teachers last year and thereby helped stabilise the government.

Even now, after the government has shown it will not depart from its chosen course, GSSE leader Yannis Panagopoulos has proclaimed his readiness to negotiate. “We do not reject dialogue,” he said, and denounced the government for “choosing monologue rather than dialogue.”

The opposition parties have tried to capitalise on the protests. The participation of a PASOK delegation in the protests was the height of hypocrisy. Several times during its period in office, PASOK had attempted to cap pensions. In 2001, its last attempt to radically restructure the pension system at the cost of the work force led to major protests that forced the government to withdraw its plans.

The left-wing alliance SYRIZA also participated in the protests. SYRIZA includes all manner of groupings and serves as a catch-all for disappointed PASOK supporters. The continuing decline of social democracy in Greece means the alliance is taking on ever-greater significance, with the signals between PASOK and SYRIZA regarding possible collaboration becoming ever clearer since the elections.

The far-right LAOS, which for the first time is represented in parliament following the elections in September, also participated in the protest. Although it has no basis in the working class, it has tried to exploit the anger of the general population against the conservatives and the social democrats.

The Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the trade union PAME organised a separate protest demonstration. This does not mean, however, that they have a policy that is fundamentally different from that of PASOK and the other unions.

The KKE is the oldest party in Greece and had a substantial following in the general population in the aftermath of the 1974 fall of the military dictatorship. Until the end of the 1980s, it oriented strongly towards Moscow. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the KKE also collapsed.

With the split-off of several factions, only a hard core of Stalinists remains, and even they are torn apart by internal disputes. The KKE has acted as a political auxiliary to PASOK. If it is now dissociating itself somewhat, that is only because it seeks to avoid being dragged down by the decline of PASOK and is positioning itself to disorient and betray a new mass upsurge of the working class.



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