

Strike wave continues in Greece

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For the third time since December, a general strike paralysed large parts of public life in Greece last Wednesday. Among those taking part in the protests against a planned pension reform by the conservative government led by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis were doctors, air traffic controllers, dock workers, journalists, hotel personnel and gas station workers. More than 100,000 filled the city centre of Athens, and 8,000 protested in Saloniki.

In total, 2 million have taken part in each of the separate strike protests, or almost half of the Greek labour force. Once again, workers and employees from all occupational groups, including those not known for their militancy, took part in the latest strike.

The general strike represented the high point of several labour disputes taking place across the whole country during recent weeks. On Tuesday, railway workers went on strike for 24 hours. Banks remained closed, and the courts were also hit by a one-week strike of lawyers. Rubbish piled up in the streets as garbage workers joined the strike. Power was cut off repeatedly during the last two weeks, following industrial action by electricity workers. One week earlier, a strike by employees of the central bank had disabled the computer system of the Greek stock exchange for three days.

Further strikes and protests are planned for the coming weeks. Lawyers, bank employees and other occupational groups have announced their intention of taking further measures against the eradication of social and welfare gains by the government.

Telecommunication workers at Hellenic Telekom have also announced strikes for the coming days. They are protesting against the planned sale of further parts of the Greek telecommunications company to German Telekom. The New Democracy (ND) government aims to sell off more than 20 percent of the Greek telecommunications enterprise to the German company. This will leave less than 20 percent of the formerly completely nationalised enterprise in state ownership, stripping the government of any sort of control. Workers are fearful that the result of

the transaction will be further dismissals and savings at the expense of the remaining workforce, as has taken place in the course of previous privatisations.

The strikes and protests are primarily directed against the government's pension reform. This reform involves an increase of contribution years for the legal pension scheme, which means in fact an increase in the working life before eligibility for a pension.

Despite mass protests, the Greek parliament passed the disputed reform at the beginning of the week with a small majority; 151 of the total of 300 deputies approved the law, while just 13 voted against. The parliamentary group of the social-democratic opposition party, PASOK, had quit the parliament before the vote. A crowd of several thousand also turned up on the evening of vote to protest in the capital city.

The pension reform lies at the heart of the policy of the Karamanlis government, which pledged itself to a strict programme of reforms following its election victory last year. The government is determined to continue the process of the redistribution of wealth from the less well-off to the wealthy, which had been set in motion by its predecessor. For example, the central bank recently announced a profit increase of 70 percent to 1.7 billion euros for the year 2007. At the same time, the bank is demanding that its employees work at least two years longer before they can qualify for reduced pension benefits.

Further cuts are also planned to the current supplementary pension allowances. A worker with 35 years of service entitled to a pension of 1,050 euros plus a supplementary allowance of 588 euros will now receive 378 euros less.

The Karamanlis government can only openly defy such displays of public opposition because it knows it confronts no serious political opposition. In the elections last September, Karamanlis had been able to secure a narrow government majority for the ND despite suffering clear losses and under conditions of a marked swing to the left by voters.

While PASOK has declared its opposition to the pension cuts, its stance is utterly hypocritical and is largely rejected by a majority of the population. During its own time in power, PASOK had undertaken a number of initiatives aimed at cutting pensions. When the PASOK government sought to introduce its own package of pension cuts in 2001, it was confronted with massive protests. At that time, the PASOK government felt obliged to back down and nearly lost its government majority in the crisis.

The two main Greek federations of trade unions, GSSE and ADEDY, which also called for strikes last week, also have a long tradition of cooperation with the country's political elite and maintain particularly close relations with PASOK.

Although under pressure from their members to take a more radical stance, the union bureaucracies are intent on finalising a deal with the government. Although the government has refused to make any compromises, prominent trade unionists have repeatedly pleaded for dialogue with the ND.

Under conditions of a growing radicalisation and the rapid decline of PASOK, middle class radical groupings are playing an increasingly important role. Along with the Greek Communist Party, this role is played above all by Synaspismos, an amalgam of radical and so-called socialist groups. In 2004, Synaspismos united with other radical tendencies to form the leftist coalition SYRIZA.

A current poll by the conservative daily paper *Kathimerini* and the TV station Skai recorded that SYRIZA had increased its share of popular support from 11.5 to 17 percent, while PASOK had declined from 35 to 31 percent. At the same time, more than half of all Greeks (54 percent) declare that neither PASOK nor the ND can solve the country's present problems. This is an increase of over 13 percent within a month.

SYRIZA is playing a similar role to organisations such as Communist Refoundation in Italy and the Left Party in Germany—i.e., a delicate balancing act between posing as an extra-parliamentary opposition and working to lever social democratic forces back into power. While SYRIZA is preparing to take part in a “left” coalition government, it is attempting to win influence amongst radicalised youth and workers who are increasingly disillusioned with PASOK. The result is violent faction fights in the ranks of the organisation.

Up until February of this year, Alekos Alavanos stood at the head of Synaspismos. Then he resigned for health reasons, but continues to lead SYRIZA's parliamentary

fraction.

Alavanos, an economist, is typical of the social and political orientation of this tendency as a whole. He comes from the ultra-Stalinist environment of the Communist Party. He also belongs to the country's upper class and possesses a number of properties on the island of Tenos. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which unleashed a crisis in the Greek CP, Alavanos contributed to the founding of Synaspismos.

Alavanos has been replaced as head of Synaspismos by Fotis Kouvelis, who began his political career in the resistance to the military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974, and the 33-year-old Alexis Tsipras.

Kouvelis is a leading member of a faction that had earlier split from the Communist Party before joining Synaspismos. He has been a deputy in the Greek parliament on a number of occasions since 1989 and was even justice minister for a few months in 1989. Kouvelis is intent on pragmatically forming a broad parliamentary coalition with the leftovers of the Greek Communist Party and PASOK.

In the end, Kouvelis failed to take over the presidency of Synaspismos, losing out to the chairman of the youth movement, Tsipras, who had spoken out against such a course. Tsipras prefers to put the emphasis on the “extra-parliamentary” movement. At his first showing, Tsipras won more than 10 percent of the vote for local elections in Athens. Behind Tsipras's selection as chairman of Synaspismos lies the fear by prominent political circles that the SYRIZA alliance could discredit itself too quickly by any over-hasty adaptation to Greece's discredited social democratic movement.

Any differences, however, are purely of a tactical nature. SYRIZA is trying to direct the militancy of the population into channels that are harmless for the ruling class, and the alliance does not represent any sort of political alternative to PASOK and the Communist Party. Behind its radical denunciations of the government's reforms, the organisation specialises in middle class protest politics. In the parliamentary elections last year, the alliance refused to raise socialist demands. There is a long tradition of close cooperation between PASOK and such “lefts” at a municipal level and in the trade unions.



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