

Major Greek unions strike to protest privatization

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The two largest unions in Greece organized strikes on Thursday, May 15, of workers in telecommunications, banking and transportation. The national actions were called to protest government plans to effectively privatize OTE, the Hellenic Telecommunications Organization, along with large portions of shipping operations at two major ports. GSEE, the country's largest labor union, called 24-hour strikes at OTE and at shipping operations in Piraeus and Thessaloniki.

In the center of downtown Athens, workers staged a march from the Omonia Plaza Metro station to Sindagma Square opposite the national parliament building in the city center.

Police fired tear gas to prevent strikers from entering the headquarters of the National Bank of Greece. There were no reported injuries or arrests.

On the same day, 2,000 students staged a separate demonstration and launched sit-ins at 10 universities.

Olympic Airlines, the government carrier, was compelled to cancel 40 flights to and from Athens, and to reschedule an additional 16 international and domestic flights because of work stoppages by pilots and air traffic controllers. Aegean Airlines cancelled an additional 28 flights.

Deutsche Telekom (DT) has purchased 25 percent of OTE in a deal that gives the German concern managing control of the Greek phone service and threatens complete privatization. Protests from opposition parties in parliament, coupled with actions by the unions, escalated on May 14 when Finance Minister George Alogoskoufis announced that DT would purchase a 19.56 percent share of the company from the private investment firm Martin Investment Group. The government facilitated the deal by selling DT an additional 3 percent for €29.75 per share.

The transaction reduces government holdings from 28

percent to 25 percent. By purchasing an additional 2 percent of the company on the open market DT will obtain a parity stake immediately, with the government and the company each holding 25 percent. In response to the news, OTE stock fell 8 percent the next day to close at €18.82 per share on fears that the move would provoke the unions.

The conservative New Democracy government is simultaneously moving to sell the rights to manage container terminals at the ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki. Giant firms Cosco and Hutchinson from China and Dubai World Ports from the United Arab Emirates are competing for the contract, which would secure control of the container operations at the two ports for 30 years.

Banners on Thursday's march called for the restoration of the telecommunications industry to 100 percent public ownership. Perrakis Alexandros, president of the Telecommunications Workers Union for the Athens area, told the WSWS, "We are on strike because we are opposing privatization." The privatization would hurt the general public because the cost of communications services would increase and the quality of service would decline. "It is not only a problem in Greece, or the European Union," he said, "that workers' wages and rights are being cut down. It is the same problem all over the world. This is due to the system that we live in, capitalism. To make more profit, the capitalists cut wages and workers' rights."

Yannis and Angelos, who held one of the banners, said the actions were organized against the threat to jobs and working conditions posed by privatization. "The only way, finally, to secure jobs and working conditions," Yannis said, "is that the public has to defeat capitalism." Turning to world politics, he said, "Iraq is an imperialist war, only for oil and to open

markets in Asia to American industries. Everyone sees that.”

The strikers have been following the US election campaign and commented that Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama did not represent an alternative to the policies of the Bush administration. “The only chance for real change is to build a separate party of the working class,” said Yannis. “I would tell the workers in America that the problem is not just with Bush. After him, Clinton or Obama will be the same. It is the system of capitalism which must be changed.”

The *Athens News* reported that a vote against the Telekom deal in parliament could bring down the government and precipitate a general election. The paper also reported that although Alogoskoufis denied reports that the government was moving to liquidate all of its holdings in OTE, many observers believed that to be the case.

The state will receive €442.3 million and Martin Investment Group will get €2.55 billion. As soon as the transaction goes into effect, the structure of the company board of directors will shift to give five of its ten members to DT and five to the Greek state.

Despite holding a mere one seat majority in parliament, the government is pushing ahead with plans for aggressive privatizations and massive cuts in government pension plans.

In response, the unions have staged a number of protests. ADEDY, the civil servants’ union, called a three-hour strike on May 14 at the state-run electric utility, PPC, and other public utilities to oppose plans for privatization and cuts in pensions and to demand a salary increase from €658 to €1,300.



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