General strike in Greece amid deepening financial crisis

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A 24-hour general strike was staged Tuesday, October 21, across Greece, grinding the country's major infrastructure to a halt. The strike involved workers in air traffic, urban transport and public services.

Public offices across the country were forced to close, with hundreds of thousands of people reported to have joined the nationwide strike called by private sector umbrella union GSEE and its public sector counterpart ADEDY, representing around 2.5 million people--around half of Greece's workforce.

Almost 200 domestic and international flights and many train services were cancelled, while ferries were forced to remain in port. State hospitals ran on skeleton staffs and schools, universities and post offices were closed. Bank staff, lawyers and civil engineers also joined the strike.

One union official said that participation in the strike in many sectors exceeded 90 percent of the workforce, while another official claimed that the overall size of the strike was in the millions. Journalists were also on strike.

The general strike was called over several issues including the 2009 draft budget, privatisations, and limits on pay, changes to the pension system and opposition to the recently proposed bailout for Greece's main banks.

Opposition to the banks bailout was especially vocal during one of the demonstration marches through Athens on Tuesday. According to Reuters, thousands of workers marched through central Athens,"to oppose the 2009 draft budget, which goes to parliament for debate this week. They are also angry at tax collection measures and privatisations of companies, such as Olympic Airlines."

Two marches made their way through Athens, voicing opposition to the 2009 draft budget that is due to go before parliament this week, and demanding the €700 minimum wage is doubled.

Many of the demonstrators angrily protested the recent €28 billion ($37 billion) government rescue deal to protect the main Greek banks hit by the international credit crisis. One banner read: "Not one euro to support the capitalists."

Kyriaki Tassioula, 45, a waitress, said, "We are protesting because they are not listening to us... The government guarantees the banks but it cut my pension."

Dimitris Papadogonas, 28, an artist, said, "We are here because we have problems and the government ignores us, but politicians are rich and we are poor."

One demonstrator said, "Capitalism, which defines this crisis, has become dangerous for workers and their job security."

Stathis Anestis, a spokesman for GSEE, was quoted by AP as saying, "The government must change its ways. We will continue if they persist and we will intensify our struggle with more strikes."

While one protest in the capital Athens passed off peacefully, scuffles broke out at a separate rally between riot police and youths throwing stones. Riot police fired tear gas. There were two injuries.

According to libcom.org, "During the course of the protest march provocative riot police forces attempted to break the university asylum of Propylaea on whose grounds the initial gathering of the trade unions took place. This attempt was faced with the active response of anarchosyndicalists and students. The reaction of the police, which employed tear gas against the demonstrators injuring two, was effectively counteracted by an attack of the dockworkers in defence of the asylum."

The general strike is the latest and most concentrated expression of the opposition by the Greek working class to the economic policies of the Conservative government of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis. Greece, which accounts for around 2.5 percent of the euro zone economy, is experiencing the effects of the slowdown of the global capitalist economy. In common with other European administrations, the Greek government intends to make the workers and the struggling sections of the middle class pay for the crisis while seeking to shield the wealthy. Consequently, the Karamanlis administration is pushing ahead with the privatisation of major concerns, recalibrating the pension system against the interests of millions of retired and retiring workers—by eliminating most early retirement schemes, merging pension funds and capping auxiliary pensions—and handing over billions of euros to the financial elite.

Greece's seven largest banks, including the National Bank of Greece, control 90 percent of the market. The €28 billion rescue plan includes Greece providing up to €15 billion to back new bank loans or refinance existing ones. The Greek government has already said it plans to raise deposit guarantees, after countries across Europe took similar measures.

Last month, the government proposed to sell off the faltering Olympic Airlines. According to AP, "flagging revenues forced the government to impose new taxes on capital gains and the self-employed earlier this year, and also to intensify plans to privatize ailing state companies."

Karamanlis won re-election, only last year, partly through reassurances that workers would be protected from mass layoffs while his administration set out to tackle key social and economic reforms.

Despite repeated assurances to shield consumers from price rises and compensate workers from privatised firms, the popularity of the government—currently protecting a fragile parliamentary four-seat majority—has plummeted amidst allegations of cronyism and corruption.

Meanwhile union leaders say the prospect of widespread job losses and government reform of wage and social security benefits will push more of the 11 million population into poverty. One in five Greek workers live below the poverty line, earning less than 5,000 euros a year, according to government figures.