

Greek farmers protest government and EU policies

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Greek farmers protested for most of last week against the agricultural policy of the conservative government led by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis. Their anger is directed against drastically falling prices for their products, which have drastically undermined their incomes. They are demanding state subsidies and tax exemptions for their products.

Beginning last Tuesday, several thousand farmers blocked important traffic junctions across the country and at border crossings. On Friday traffic was brought to standstill at 20 important junctions on the Greek mainland and on the island of Crete. The most important north-south transport route between Athens and the port of Thessaloniki was closed in several places with drivers forced to make time-consuming detours over mountain roads. Farmers also temporarily occupied the main airport on Crete outside its capital city Heraklion, resulting in a total of 17 flights being cancelled.

Farmers used their tractors to block the border crossings to Macedonia at Evzonoï-Bogorodica, one of the most frequented north-south road links in the Balkan region. Kilometer-long traffic jams developed, with similar jams on the border to Bulgaria at Exohi-Kulata. At the latter border, farmers intent on crossing over into Bulgaria to protest clashed with police who tried to stop them crossing to the Bulgarian side. The Greek border with Turkey at Kipoi-Ipsala was also blocked for a time.

The protests are a consequence of the intolerable living conditions confronting farmers in Greece. For years their incomes have declined as general price inflation increased. According to the farmers' trade union, the income of farmers has decreased during the past 10 years by around 24 percent. "We are unable to

make any sort of living", was the complaint by angry farmers, who had closed off the country's most important north-south route close to the city of Larissa last week.

There has been a series of protests by farmers in recent years against the constant decline in prices paid for their produce on the agricultural commodities market. But at the beginning of this year the situation worsened drastically, with prices for agricultural products sinking to around half the level of the previous year. According to the farmers' union, farmers received 44 cents per kilo of corn in 2007. In 2008 this figure had fallen to between 11 and 13 cents. In 2008 the price paid to farmers for a kilo of oil was about €3; in the meantime this figure has nearly halved. The price for cotton sunk from 40 cents to around 17 cents per kilo. Wheat prices slumped from 30-34 cents per kilo to just 17 cents.

The protests are also directed against the European Union, which is jointly responsible for the decline in prices and has also constantly cut the level of subsidies to farmers. The entry by Greece into the European Union led to a decimation of agricultural production. At the date of its entry into the EU in 1981, 24 percent of the Greek population was active in the agricultural sector. Today this figure stands at around 10 percent. Athens received more than €50 billion from Brussels for the restructuring of its agricultural sector, but in fact the consequences were dire for Greek farmers. Today a third of Greece's annual wheat demand must be covered by imports from foreign countries.

The country's biggest opposition party, the social-democratic Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), led the government nearly continuously throughout the 1980s and initiated both the country's entry into the European Union and the "modernization" of its

agriculture on the basis of instructions from Brussels. In 1997, when similar protests by farmers took place for a number of weeks, the PASOK government cracked down hard on the farmers. It intervened with state forces that sabotaged the farmer's tractors, punctured their tires and cleared the protesters from the highways with a massive show of police force. Farmers can only shake their heads in amazement and anger when PASOK now cynically declares it is on their side.

A declaration by the government that it would agree to a €500 million aid package for the farmers has also been greeted with ridicule. A spokesman for the farmers declared, "These are just crumbs offered by the state...we will blockade everything..."

In fact, the €500 million package is merely a drop in the ocean. Last year when it became clear that the Greek economy and the country's banks were suffering due to the international financial crisis, the conservative New Democracy government immediately decided upon an emergency rescue package for the banks totalling €28 billion.

Farmers also have bitter memories of unfulfilled government promises following the devastating forest fires of last year. Initially, the government promised to help all those farmers who had lost their homes and farms due to the fires. In fact, only about 20 percent of affected farmers received favourable credits and aid payments. With the economic situation in Greece spiralling out of control in the wake of the finance crisis, further budget cuts in agriculture and across the board are inevitable.

Political circles and the media sought to present the protests by farmers as an isolated phenomenon centred on the interests of a small group. However, such protests must be seen in connection with the series of protests by Greek students and young people that peaked in December. The latter protests have their roots in the catastrophic conditions prevailing in the country's schools and universities. The education sector has also been a victim of continuous cuts and savings measures made at the behest of big business and banking interests.

As is the case with the student protests, the demonstrations by farmers have also won the support of the majority of the population. Despite substantial inconvenience for many drivers and small businessmen, many of them spontaneously supported the action taken

by farmers at the road blockades.

Such popular support stands in stark contrast to the hypocritical declarations of solidarity made by the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza). While the secretary-general of the KKE, Aleka Pappariga, has taken every opportunity to line up alongside the farmers for media photo-shoots, her party was a bitter opponent of the student protests and has sought to bolster the ND government by refraining from calling for fresh elections.

Syriza has also declared it supports the farmers' demands for tax exemptions and additional subsidies. A spokesman for Syriza declared it would lobby in the European parliament on behalf of the Greek farmers. In fact, such support by Syriza only serves to encourage illusions in bourgeois institutions such as the EU and is aimed at nipping any protests in the bud.



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