

Greek public sector workers strike against austerity measures

Our reporters
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Schools, universities, public offices and the airport in Athens were shut down by yesterday's 24-hour strike. Hospitals ran an emergency-only service, while buses operated a limited timetable. All flights were grounded as air traffic controllers and aviation electronics engineers joined the walkout. Meanwhile, the farmers' blockade of the Athens-Salonika main motorway is continuing.

The protests are directed against the austerity programme of the Papandreou government, which has been dictated by the European Union and the international banks. Greece is being forced to cut its deficit from 12.7 percent to below three percent in just two years.

Yesterday morning, new tax and social security measures were announced. Public sector workers have to work two years longer, while fuel prices have climbed to 1.5 euro per litre—an increase of around 10 percent.

As workers were striking in Greece, Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou was in Paris defending his austerity plan and declaring his government “absolutely decided to make sure it is implemented in every detail.”

After a meeting with President Nicolas Sarkozy, Papandreou said he had assured his French counterpart that “we have the will to implement the stability and growth plan.... We are ready to do whatever is necessary.”

There were big demonstrations in both Athens and Thessaloniki. In Athens, the official demonstration was called by public sector union ADEDY, which has ties to the social-democratic PASOK. PAME, which has close ties to the Stalinist Communist Party (KKE) held a separate rally. Both demonstrations totalled around

20,000 people, which included teachers, hospital workers, firemen, sanitation workers, engineers, archaeologists and university and high school students.

Banner slogans included, “No to the capitalist parasites. The wealth belongs to the workers,” “The answer of the workers is war on the capitalists,” “No to slave labour” and “the plutocrats must pay for the crisis.”

Alongside this militant atmosphere there was a marked distrust in the official trade unions, whose strategy has been to limit strike action to one-day partial mobilisations in order to contain and defuse working class opposition.

The protest included a group called “Initiative of Finance Ministry employees.” Their banner read, “Workers will cancel the plans of the government and EU and the collusion of the trade unions and the mass media.”

Alexis, one of the group, said, “The leaderships of the trade unions have abandoned the interests of workers. Workers should reorganise themselves from the base upwards.”

Two teachers, Veni and Maya, were also doubtful whether their union represents their real interests. Veni said, “Their action is mostly limited to 24-hour strikes,” which she and her colleagues sarcastically refer to as “anniversary” strikes. “We are against that,” she added.

Veni explained that resources are especially scarce in schools in the centre of Athens. “While teachers may not belong to the 700-euro bracket of the population, their living standard is not high. Politicians are trying to sort out their crisis at the expense of people like us who are struggling already with bills and debts.”

Panayiotis is a machine operator working for a big construction company in Athens. He said, “The situation for Greek workers is very difficult. The cost of living is going up all the time while wages get cut. I haven’t received a raise in three years. There is high unemployment, especially in the construction industry. All construction companies have laid-off workers, including the one I work for. The measures being imposed are against workers and in favour of capital. Now the government wants to increase the pensionable age and cut pensions. We were expecting different things from the Papandreou government.”

Yiannis said, “I feel frustrated, cheated and robbed. Time and time again I have believed in pre-election promises to workers only to see them subsequently broken. Today they are clamping down in the worst possible way. I happen to work for a part state-owned company. I cannot forget all those workers who cannot be here today due to intimidation and economic pressures. We have one of the lowest incomes in the EU, and at the supermarket we pay higher prices than elsewhere in Europe.”

The unemployed have been especially hard hit. Nikos from Corfu has been unemployed since November. He has one child and he gets just 540 euro a month in unemployment benefits, which will stop in April. “I am already feeling the squeeze,” he said. His flat costs 515 euro per month. He can only afford to live with the supplementary income his family gets from his grandmother’s pension. “All workers of Europe should fight together against the cuts from the EU,” he said.

In sharp contrast to this spontaneous striving for international unity of the workers is the national outlook of organisations like SYRIZA, the Coalition of the Radical Left, which claims to oppose the austerity measures.

We spoke to Costas Isychos of the International Labour Department of Synaspismos, the largest group within the SYRIZA coalition. He betrayed a completely nationalistic outlook in his attitude towards workers in other European countries. Confronted with the betrayals of Rifondazione in Italy, a similar coalition group that entered the bourgeois Prodi government

colluding in the latter’s attacks on the Italian workers’ pension rights, he said, “We are not judging realities in other countries. We are talking of Greece here. The experiment of SYRIZA is unique in the world.”

A second one-day public sector strike is scheduled for February 17, and a one-day general strike has been called for February 24.



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