WSWS speaks with leader of GSSE union federation

The Greek trade unions: Partners in the government's austerity program

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As the debt crisis intensifies in Greece, the country's trade unions are playing a crucial role in ensuring that the social democratic government of Prime Minister George Papandreou is able carry out its austerity programme. Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund are demanding an escalation of the attacks on the Greek working class.

The total debt burden of Greece is estimated at more than €300 billion and is set to rise in 2010 to 120 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). The country's budget deficit currently represents 12.7 percent of GDP. The government has pledged to reduce this to 3 percent by 2012 to comply with EU regulations, and to cut the deficit to 8.7 percent this year.

To achieve this and satisfy the financial markets, Papandreou recently stated that it would be necessary to "draw blood." To this end, an immediate €2.5 billion reduction in public spending is being implemented, including a wage freeze across the public sector, a 20 percent across-the-board cut in civil service bonuses, and a two-year increase in the average retirement age.

Other measures set to be introduced include an increase in the value added tax rate (currently 19 percent) and a hike in fuel, alcohol and tobacco taxes. The EU has also demanded that Athens slash one of two extra months of pay that public sector workers now receive in addition to their normal 12-month salary.

The two main trade union federations, the private sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), both supported the election of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government of Papandreou last October.

Whilst making the occasional populist criticism of the Papandreou regime for "succumbing" to the financial markets, union leaders are working closely with government representatives to impose the spending cuts.

There is widespread popular anger over the unprecedented austerity measures. The attacks are being imposed on a population that already had one of the lowest standards of living in the European Union. Many workers live in conditions of poverty in a country where about a quarter of all employees earn the minimum wage.

This is the background to the one-day general strike called by the two trade union federations on Wednesday. The unions resorted to such a step to contain public opposition, hoping to provide an opportunity for workers to let off steam and thereby buy time for the crisis-ridden Greek government.

In the 1990s, mainly under PASOK governments, the unions were instrumental in the privatisation of publicly owned industries. Under Prime Minister Constantin Simitis in 1996, PASOK set in motion a process of deregulation and privatisation of broad areas of public service. In pursuing these free-market policies, PASOK utilised to the full its close links to the unions—in particular, the GSEE. Apart from token protest demonstrations and strikes, the GSEE and ADEDY did nothing to oppose the privatisations.

Today, the trade union federations are playing the same reactionary role, but under drastically changed conditions.

The corporatist agenda of the unions was summed up in comments made in January by Stathis Anestis, the GSEE spokesman and member of the executive

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committee of the union. He said, “We can't escape the fact that we have a very serious problem on our hands,” and added, “We are willing to accept tough measures on the condition that they are just.”

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, on January 29, Anestis declared that in its current round of wage bargaining, the GSEE, representing more than a million workers, was considering supporting a freeze on private-sector wages, providing that employers guaranteed no layoffs. Given the treacherous record of the GSEE, the proviso demanding a no-layoff guarantee should be dismissed out-of-hand by workers.

On February 25, one day after the general strike, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* conducted an interview with Anestis, who confirmed that his union was essentially opposed to strike action. Anestis reiterated that, “The confederations and the trade unions supported the election of this government.” He added, “It is not that we wish to strike.”

The unions gave this critical political support on the grounds that PASOK represented a progressive alternative to the hated conservative New Democracy government, headed by Kostas Karamanlis, which ruled from 2004 to 2009.

Anestis pointed to the 15 percent decrease in the buying power of workers’ wages in Greece in the last year, but at the same time made clear that his union had no intention of defending workers’ living standards. Echoing the language of the government, he claimed that “times are now difficult,” and therefore, “I cannot demand a full 15 percent increase in salaries.”

Anestis said GSEE would ask for a 4 percent increase in pay. At the same time, he made clear that the union would do everything in its power to ensure that workers contributed their “fair share” to help the Greek banks and corporations and the government out of their current dilemma. This is a signal that the union federation is prepared to drop even its paltry 4 percent demand.

The unions’ policy dovetails with the demand of the PASOK regime that “highly paid” public servants earning more than €2,000 a month forgo pay rises in the future.

The same message of “sharing the pain” is being propagated by the ADEDY civil servants’ union, whose leader, Spyros Papaspyrou, told the *Financial Times* recently, “If the measures are proportionate and affect not just the public sector but the whole of society, we will mobilise to help the country get out of this situation.”

Anestis insisted in his interview with the *WSWS* that the union federation had to agree to cuts. He said, “What you accept and what you don’t accept depends on the situation you are in. When you have a knife at your neck, then it is a different situation.”

Putting forward the union as a force for stability and order, Anestis declared that it was impossible for workers to act independently on behalf of their interests, and bluntly told the WSWS, “Workers cannot overthrow this political system considering the way it is constructed today.”

The arguments of Anestis are totally dishonest. It is workers in Greece who are confronted with “a knife at the neck,” and the unions have whetted this knife through decades of support for the Papandreou dynasty.

The union bureaucracies were for many years able to profit from their close relationship with PASOK, in the form of privileges, sinecures and fat salaries. Now their chief concern is to ensure that their role in diverting working class opposition into safe channels is sufficiently recognised and rewarded.

In times of crisis, the Greek bourgeoisie has repeatedly resorted to social democratic governments supported by the trade unions to safeguard its interests. Today, the Greek debt crisis has revealed PASOK to be nothing more than an instrument of the global financial institutions and the European Union.

The unions are the most steadfast defenders of the profit system. On the basis of their nationalist perspective, they demand that the working class make “sacrifices”—meaning the destruction of all previously won social gains.

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