

Amid angry protests in Greece

Papandreou pledges to impose austerity plan in meeting with German PM

Ulrich Rippert
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After meeting in the morning with Jean-Claude Juncker, the head of the Eurogroup, Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin Friday evening and gave assurances that he would push through the draconian austerity measures demanded by the European banks and the European Union.

While the social democratic PASOK prime minister was appealing for Germany's political support for his government as it attacked the living standards of the Greek working class, tens of thousands of workers and youth were demonstrating in Athens and Thessaloniki, carrying banners calling for a "war against the war of the capitalists."

Spontaneous demonstrations broke out near Greek government buildings and the parliament as deputies voted in a special sitting on the latest package of austerity measures announced Wednesday by Papandreou.

Several hundred protesters surrounded the Ministry of Finance in Athens and prevented officials from entering the building. They temporarily occupied several offices and took over the entrance of the ministry, hanging a banner reading "Arise to stop the Measures from Coming into Force."

While Papandreou was still in Berlin, a new strike by air traffic controllers shut down all of Greece's airports. In Athens, no buses or trams ran on Friday. Primary school teachers and even police officers, who are affected by the planned cuts, called for walkouts. A further national strike day was announced for March 16.

In his talks in Berlin, Papandreou assured Merkel and

Juncker that he was ready to enforce "painful cuts." He declared that he had not come to Berlin to ask the German government for money. He was not requesting "German taxpayers to pay for our pensions and vacations," Papandreou said in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Rather, he was seeking political support for his government's austerity measures.

On Wednesday, the Greek government agreed to a second, more drastic austerity package, which includes tax increases and spending cuts amounting to 4.8 billion euros. The measures include an increase in the value added tax from the current 19 percent to 21 percent; a 10 percent reduction in public sector wages; tax increases on petrol, tobacco and alcohol; the freezing of pensions, and a reduction in allowances for civil servants.

Announcing the new measures, Papandreou spoke of Greece being in a "war situation." The population had to be prepared to make sacrifices, he declared, for the "survival of our country."

Merkel and Juncker welcomed the latest measures as an important first step, but warned Papandreou that he could not ease off and had to prepare further austerity measures to reassure the international financial markets and improve the country's creditworthiness.

Merkel pointedly refrained from any pledge of financial support for the Greek government. Instead, she praised the willingness of Papandreou to work closely with the European Union and promised political support in pushing through the austerity measures.

Merkel did not spell out the content of this political support, but it was clear that such support was contingent on the PASOK regime defying mass popular

opposition to the cuts. This can only mean support for any repressive measures Papandreou might take to suppress strikes and protests against the austerity program.

Since the introduction of the Schengen Agreement, ratified a decade ago in the Greek parliament, and the consequent elimination of border controls, cooperation between the Greek and German security agencies has been stepped up. This cooperation will be strengthened to deal with further strikes and mass demonstrations.

At the same time, the Merkel government is using its relations with the trade unions to keep the strikes and protests in Greece under control and prevent them from spreading. The German unions play a key role in the European and international labour organizations, and have worked relentlessly to prevent the emergence of European-wide struggles against layoffs and attacks on working class living standards.

They combine calling occasional protests to contain popular militancy and anger with the closest collaboration with the corporations and the European governments. John Monks, the general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), addressed the rally in Athens during the February 24 general strike. While he was launching a verbal tirade against the austerity measures of the EU, Germany's largest union, IG Metall, was signing a two-year wage freeze in a rearguard action to prop up the Merkel government and the German banks.

In his visit to Berlin, Papandreou behaved like a typical social democrat. In the face of mounting popular anger at home, he sought the support of the strongest imperialist power on the continent. Knowing that the German banks are the leading force behind Brussels' financial dictates, he repeatedly asserted his eagerness for the closest possible cooperation. His servility before Merkel was open and unabashed.

This has not satisfied much of the German media and political establishment. *Die Welt* previously reported that the German government wanted to see a "European Special Representative" appointed for Greece, whose role would be to monitor the implementation of the austerity programme on the ground. He or she could also serve as a "lightning rod for protests by the Greek population," the newspaper wrote.

Papandreou uttered not a word of protest against such threats to his country's national sovereignty or

demands for what amounts to placing Greece under receivership.

The servile attitude of the Greek prime minister seems only to have fueled the arrogance of some German politicians and sections of the media. In an interview with *Bild*, Josef Schlarmann, chairman of the Christian Democratic Small Business Association, said: "A bankrupt has to use everything he has to earn money—to pay his creditors." Greece, he noted, possesses buildings, companies and uninhabited islands "which can be used to repay the debt."

Marco Wanderwitz, a prominent Christian Democrat, demanded that Greece offer "securities... for example, some Greek islands."

In a deliberate provocation, *Bild* published a letter to Papandreou in Friday's edition declaring, "If you've read this, you are in a country that is quite different from yours. You are in Germany."

The letter went on to say that, unlike Greece, people in Germany did not laze about, but worked till they were "67 years old." Germany, it continued, was a country where workers had not received generous salary increases for some time, not even civil servants.

"No one has to pay thousands of euros in bribes" to be admitted to hospital in Germany, continued the newspaper's rant. Although Germany has high debts, it can pay them back, it said, "Because we get up pretty early and work all day."

One would have to go back to the Nazi period to find such a level of editorial arrogance directed against "inferior" peoples.



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