Opposition deepens to austerity programme in Greece

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Opposition to the austerity measures being imposed by the Greek government has hardened in the run-up to today's general strike.

In the last week refuse workers, tax officials, school, hospital and transport workers have taken strike action. Demonstrations have been held on a daily basis, with a number of government buildings occupied or blockaded by angry protesters.

The strikes and protests are in response to the latest austerity programme passed March 5 by the government headed by Prime Minister George Papandreou of the social democratic PASOK. It has pledged to slash Greece's budget deficit from the current 12.7 percent of GDP to 8.7 percent in 2010, under a European Union-endorsed plan.

The new austerity programme includes tax increases and spending cuts totalling €4.8 billion ($6.5 billion). The cuts are the equivalent of 2 percent of Greece's GDP. Its provisions include a sales tax increase from 19 percent to 21 percent; higher excise taxes on petrol, cigarettes and alcohol; a 10 percent cut in public sector pay; a 30 percent cut in "13th and 14th month" public sector salary schemes; and a freeze on public sector pensions.

The latest cuts, the third in as many months, are far deeper than those announced previously. They will have a devastating impact on millions of working people, the unemployed and pensioners in a country where a quarter of the population are already subsisting at minimum wage levels.

Cuts will have a severe impact on the wages and conditions of hundreds of thousands of workers employed in the public sector. About half a million workers are in the civil service and a further 300,000 are employed elsewhere in the public sector.

As the measures were passed in an emergency bill, 7,000 protested in Athens with riot police attacking demonstrators in front of the parliament. The police used tear gas and brutally beat protesters, with 12 people arrested. Among those attacked was Manolis Glezos, an 87-year-old former Greek parliament member who is now a member of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza). Glezos, who was active in the Greek resistance movement against Nazi occupation, was manhandled and had teargas sprayed in his face. He was taken to hospital with respiratory problems.

Riot police were also mobilised to quell protests in the northern city of Thessaloniki, the second largest in Greece.

In a sign of the developing social tensions, Yiannis Panagopoulos, the president of the General Confederation of Workers of Greece (GSEE), the private sector workers trade union federation, was heckled, booed and then physically attacked by a number of protesters as he began to address the Athens demonstration. The GSEE is widely hated because it is the closest trade union body to the PASOK government and has previously refused to support strikes by public sector workers. The largest political faction in the GSEE is PASK, the trade union wing of PASOK. The GSEE is not opposed to the austerity measures in principle and at the last general strike on February 24 Panagopoulos called for "a fair distribution of the burden" of deficit reduction policies.

Workers in a number of sectors also staged wildcat strikes in the capital that closed schools and hospitals on March 5. Much of the nation's public transport network was brought to a halt by a 24-hour strike.

Refuse workers in Athens have extended their strike by two days so that it coincides with today's general strike, resulting in a build-up of piles of rubbish in the capital and the closure of landfills there and in other

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cities.

On Monday tax collectors began a two-day strike, while court employees are holding a series of two-hour strikes each day this week. Local government officials held a four-hour strike on Wednesday.

Since March 1, demonstrators, including unemployed workers, have attempted to block access to the Labour Ministry and the General Accounting Office in Athens. On March 1 several hundred protesters attempted to disrupt a meeting between European Union Economy Commissioner Olli Rehn and Labour Minister Andreas Loverdos. The agenda of the meeting was to discuss the necessity for immediate further austerity measures.

Another protest has taken place at the government printing office. Last Friday several dozen interior ministry workers began a sit-in at the office. After taking over the building the workers unfurled a banner in front of the building reading, “Occupation” and “Enough is Enough.”

The actions are indicative of a deepening hostility among the Greek population to the intolerable attacks being carried out by PASOK, at the behest of the European Union and the financial institutions.

Several opinion polls show a significant and sharp increase in the numbers opposing the austerity measures. A poll conducted for the *Proto Thema* newspaper found that 86.2 percent of Greek people viewed the austerity measures as “unfair.” A poll by Public Issue for Skai Television found that 62 percent of respondents believed that social unrest was “highly likely in the next 12 months.”

Previous polls, reflecting a barrage of media coverage hailing the cuts as necessary and unavoidable, had indicated that between 60 and 70 percent of those questions supported drastic economic measures that would revive the economy.

Yanis Varoufakis, professor of economics at the University of Athens, said, “Now people respond to announcements. When they become measures, and they feel them in their pocket...you will have far more serious demonstrations. They will not be as civilized as they are now.”

Both the trade unions federations who have called today’s general strike are acutely aware of the dangers posed by a mass movement against PASOK, uniting all sections of the working class and young people. Prior to today’s strike Ilias Iliopoulos, the general secretary of the ADEDY public sector federation, said bluntly, “I am afraid there will be a social explosion. People will start going hungry soon.”

The trade unions federations have called the general strike on the basis of seeking to contain this growing working class resistance and to buy time to ensure that a deal can be made with the government, enabling the attacks to be implemented. To this end the unions are portraying PASOK as the victim of international finance and the EU bureaucracy, rather than the representative of Greek capital, and are attempting to channel popular opposition in a nationalist direction.

Speaking ahead of the latest general strike, Yannis Grivas, president of the tax collectors’ union, summed up the attitude of the trade union bureaucracy when he said, “It is just a symbolic protest. We understand that the austerity measures are necessary.

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