

# Greece: Millions join general strike against government austerity package

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Workers throughout Greece staged their second one-day general strike within a month yesterday to protest the austerity measures being imposed by the PASOK social democratic government of Prime Minister George Papandreou.

The strike took place just days after the Greek parliament ratified the latest austerity package, which imposes €4.8 billion (\$6.5 billion) in tax increases and spending cuts. Public sector workers, in particular, are to be hit with an across-the-board pay cut of about 7 percent this year, which includes a 30 percent reduction in salary entitlements usually paid at Easter, during the summer and at Christmas.

These cuts follow the government's initial austerity budget, which promised to cut Greece's budget deficit by 4 percent of gross domestic product this year, including a two-year increase in the retirement age to 63, a public sector wage freeze, and mass layoffs of private contractors working for the government.

The strike involved an estimated 3 million workers, with the majority in organisations affiliated to the two main trade union federations—the private sector General Confederation of Workers of Greece (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY). The GSEE, with around 2 million members, and ADEDY, with 800,000 members, represent about half of the 5-million-strong Greek work force.

The strike was solidly supported and led to the shutdown of virtually all public services and transport networks nationwide. All scheduled flights to and from Greece were cancelled due to action by air traffic controllers. Trains were cancelled and buses and subways ground to a halt.

Most schools and hospitals were closed, with medical staff providing only emergency treatment. Ferry workers also joined the strike, and their boats remained in dock. Tax offices, courts and other municipal buildings were

closed. All post offices and banks in Athens and nationally were shut for the day. Workers employed at National Electricity, National Water and National Telecom supported the strike.

Refuse workers in Athens struck for a sixth day, after extending their action so that it would coincide with the general strike. TV news broadcasts and newspaper production were halted as media workers, including those at state broadcaster ANA, struck alongside journalists.

The only public transport operating in Athens was the ISAP tram network, which ran for several hours in order to allow protesters to attend the main demonstration. Despite not being legally allowed to strike, a delegation of 200 officers from the police, fire and customs services attended the demonstration.

More than 30,000 workers participated. The GSEE/ADEDY protest march began in Pedio tou Areos and ended at the parliament building in Syntagma Square. Demonstrators chanted slogans including, "No Sacrifice for Plutocracy" and "Real Jobs, Higher Pay." Banners were draped from apartment buildings reading: "No More Sacrifices, War Against War."

Reuters cited one worker, Odysseas Panagopoulos, a 60-year-old health sector employee, who said, "The measures are unfair... We cannot make it, we have children, families. We need to find the money to support them. Banks and rich people should pay for this crisis."

Another demonstrator said, "Well, I don't care if Greece collapses, because I've already personally collapsed. I don't have anything else to give."

Recent opinion polls show that a majority of Greeks are now opposed to the PASOK government's program to slash jobs, attack workers' rights and lower their living standards.

A separate march was called by the All-Workers Militant Front (PAME), which is affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece.

In the second largest city, Thessaloniki, in northern Greece, 14,000 people marched through the city centre to protest the cuts. Demonstrations were also held in other cities and towns, including in Ioannina, Sitia, Naxos, Veroia and the large southern city of Patras. According to one report, in Heracleion, Crete, “shops that did not allow their workers to strike were blockaded and several banks came under attack by protesters.”

Hundreds of heavily armed riot police were deployed throughout central Athens and attacked sections of the demonstration, indiscriminately using tear gas to disperse the angry crowd. Police made 16 arrests in Athens and severely injured several people in brutal beatings. Clashes between police and protesters were reported in other cities and towns.

This repression followed an order the previous day by an Athens prosecutor who called on police to forcibly remove and arrest about 150 sacked Olympic Airways workers. The unemployed workers had maintained a protest at the General Accounting Office throughout the previous week.

In calling the general strikes, the GSEE and ADEDY are not reflecting the anger of the working class, but attempting to channel it in ways that do not endanger the government and the ruling elite in Greece. The unions seek to use the one-day strikes to diffuse mass opposition and ensure that the developing movement against the austerity measures does not escalate out of their control. To this end, the unions have called yet another one-day general strike for March 16.

The unions enthusiastically supported the election of PASOK, which is serving as the representative of Greek corporations and international finance capital in carrying out the cuts in social spending.

This week, Papandreou completed a four-nation tour, which culminated in a three-day visit to the United States to meet President Barack Obama in Washington. In a private meeting, as he had done earlier with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicholas Sarkozy, Papandreou enlisted Obama’s support for his government’s austerity measures. His trip was lauded by the Greek and international media as a success.

The praise was, however, tempered with warnings that the austerity measures have yet to be imposed. The *Financial Times* commented Wednesday, “But a successful performance on the international stage—his six-day trip included stops in four capitals—cannot disguise the fact that Mr. Papandreou faces deepening troubles at home.”

The class-collaborationist position of the trade unions in defence of PASOK was summed up this week in the comments of Yannis Grivas, the president of the tax collectors’ union. Speaking about the recent strikes, he declared, “It is just a symbolic protest. We understand that the austerity measures are necessary.”

In contrast to the cowardice and duplicity of the union leadership, Dimitris Daskalopoulos of the Greek employers’ association on Thursday came out firmly in support of PASOK and condemned the popular opposition to the austerity measures. “Between bankruptcy and recession, between the devil and the deep blue sea, there is no other alternative to the abyss,” he warned. “It’s necessary to start again and reform the country.”

Just what “reform” means in the context of the global economic crisis was spelled out by sections of the media. The Libcom web site reported yesterday that the Conservative newspaper, *Kathimerini*, has called on the government to defeat the protests against the austerity measures “even if some protesters die.” The ruling elite is preparing the most ruthless repression of the working class in defence of its wealth, of which the police violence witnessed so far is only a foretaste.

There is no national solution to this crisis. Behind PASOK stand the state apparatus in Greece, the ruling classes of America and Europe, the banks and major corporations. Workers in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Britain and Ireland have also struck in opposition to austerity measures that are being imposed by their respective governments to make the working class pay for trillions of dollars in public money handed over to the banks. The struggle being waged by the workers in Greece must be seen as just one front in this developing struggle by workers throughout Europe, which must assume a conscious, organised and programmatic form in a Europe-wide and international struggle for a socialist alternative.



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