Greek trade unions close ranks behind PASOK austerity measures

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17 March 2010

As the Greek government begins implementing its austerity measures, the two major trade unions federations, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector confederation (ADEDY), are systematically demobilising opposition to the government's assault on the jobs, employment conditions and living standards of working people.

Yesterday should have been a day of industrial action by workers throughout the public sector. ADEDY originally called a 24-hour strike to be held March 16, but this was called off on the basis of their holding a joint 24-hour stoppage with the GSEE on March 11. But far from the joint strike heralding a unified struggle against the cuts, the calling off of the March 16 event has signalled an intensified effort by the trade union bureaucracy to stifle and betray the working class.

On March 5, the social democratic PASOK government of George Papandreou passed an additional austerity package of public sector pay cuts and tax increases totalling €4.8 billion ($6.5 billion). Included was a 2 percent VAT increase, reducing public sector pay by 10 percent and annual 13th and 14th month salary entitlements by 30 percent, increasing tax on fuel, tobacco and alcohol, as well as freezing state-funded pensions in 2010. The moves were in answer to the insistence by the European Union that the government's initial €11.2billion ($15.2 billion) austerity plan had not gone far enough.

This week, with the first cuts being imposed, ADEDY stated it had called an unspecified "protest rally" on the evening of March 23 and has not set a date for any future industrial action. The general secretary of ADEDY, Ilias Iliopoulos, stated on Monday that the union would only decide a date later in the month, with any action being held "either before or after Easter."

On Monday some of the severest attacks in the austerity programme came into immediate effect as VAT rose on many items. Through the increase, the government is set to raise additional revenues of €1.3 billion, or 0.5 percent of Greece's GDP. This measure will have a devastating impact on the working class, particularly its poorest layers. According to one estimate cited by *Hellenic Radio*, the VAT increases on food products, etc., will result in an additional annual cost of €1,300 to €1,500 to households.

The increase in VAT will apply to all bills issued after March 15. This is the case even if the bills are for periods before March 14, when the old rates were in force. VAT is to rise from 9 percent to 10 percent for food products, restaurants, cafes, energy use, drugs and hotel accommodation. The increase is from 19 percent to 21 percent for clothing, shoes, mobile phone bills, cosmetics, drinks, detergents, electric appliances, electronic products and furniture.

The cost of road usage also increased from Monday, with highway tolls now costing 2 percent more. Tax increases on gasoline, cigarettes, electricity and luxury goods also rose and will raise a further €1.1 billion, according to government estimates.

A survey by the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry of four European countries found that Greek consumers already pay up to 70 percent more for toothpaste, beverages and deodorants. The price of flour and flour products is up to five times higher.

On February 24 and on March 11, the private sector union confederation GSEE and ADEDY, which represent about half of the 5 million-strong Greek workforce, held joint two-hour strikes. But even these were aimed at ensuring that the growing social anger did not assume the form of a political struggle against the government.

Whilst making the occasional populist criticism of the Papandreou regime for "succumbing" to the financial markets, the trade unions have in fact offered the government only a means of implementing the spending

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cuts.

To this end workers have been deliberately isolated and forced to hold separate and limited strikes and protests this week. On Monday power workers employed by the state-owned DEH group occupied the central offices of OAED (Organisation for Employment of the Workforce). The employees took the action ahead of a two-day strike beginning yesterday and are members of the GENOP trade union. They were protesting salary cuts and a 10 percent cut in state granting to the DEH insurance fund. According to GENOP, seven plants were affected by the industrial action in Athens, Megalopolis and Ptolemaida.

As with the previous action by ADEDY/GSEE, GENOP called the strike on the most limited level to ensure that its impact would be minimal. Union president Nikos Photopoulos said on Monday, “Some units will be taken offline but we don’t want a single light bulb to go out, at this stage.”

Yesterday doctors and nurses took strike action and several hundred staged a demonstration outside the Health Ministry in Athens. The main demand of the medical workers is for the employment of more staff, safety at work, better employment rights and an increase in pay. The strike, which began at an Athens hospital, has spread to other hospitals with national action expected this week.

Some 50 to 80 disabled workers also held a demonstration outside a disability employment office. The workers were demanding jobs, employment rights and vastly increased social benefits for the disabled.

In a separate dispute, petrol station workers are set to walk off the job on Thursday.

As the protests have mounted and the austerity measures begin to be imposed, the GSEE has advanced a nationalist consumer protest campaign as opposed to industrial action. On March 12 the GSEE said in a press release that March 15, the day of the VAT increases, should be “Consumer Day” and launched a “buy Greek” campaign.

The release said, “A sensible and correct choice in consumer decisions is demanded and more generally the adoption of standards of consumer behaviour based on our real strengths and real needs.”

The GSEE has the effrontery to blame cash-strapped working people for buying cheap (imported) goods and not being patriotic enough in defence of the “Greek economy.” “On this basis our conscious turn to choosing cheap quality products and services is a one way street,” it added.

It calls for a nationalist and protectionist strategy in which “our consumption has to directly support national production.”

In an interconnected global economy, this perspective would be profoundly reactionary as a prescription to the economic crisis in any country. In the tiny economy of Greece, in which the manufacturing sector relies on imports for its raw materials, machinery, parts, and fuel, such a perspective is ludicrous.

While pitting workers in Greece against their class brothers and sisters throughout Europe, the GSEE raises barely any criticism of the PASOK government that is imposing the attacks on behalf of global finance capital.

As it becomes increasingly obvious that the trade unions are only concerned with demobilising opposition, the two pseudo-left coalitions in Greece, SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) and Antarsya (Anticapitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow), as well as the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), come forward as their apologists.

SYRIZA and Antarsya are comprised of a number of “anti-capitalist” and environmental groups. But for groups professing to be “socialist” and even “revolutionary,” they have not so much as called for the removal of the PASOK government. They take the same friendly attitude to the trade unions.

In its recent statement, SYRIZA does not even criticise the failure to call industrial action, claiming instead that the “struggle is beginning now. We continue by supporting the rallies organised by ADEDY.” Antarsya, which claims to be the radical alternative to SYRIZA, provides a similar amnesty to the trade unions and distinguishes itself only in that, after hailing the two previous one-day general strikes, they now call for a “48-hour general strike” to be organised.

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