

Greek trade unions line up behind government austerity measures

Robert Stevens
31 March 2010

The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public-sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY) are working to stifle opposition to the 16 billion euro austerity package being imposed by the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government.

On Sunday, Greek newspapers led with headlines declaring that 300,000 public sector workers will lose their jobs, and 4,000 municipal enterprises will close as a result of last week's European Union/International Monetary Fund agreement on the Greek debt crisis.

Official unemployment has already risen to 10.3 percent, with 514,000 counted as unemployed. Unemployment among women in the fourth quarter of 2009 was almost double the rate for males. Young people aged 15 to 29 were the worst affected, with a jobless rate of 25.8 percent.

According to other estimates, including that of the GSEE, the real jobless rate is much higher, standing at about 16 percent, and is likely to hit 20 percent this year.

Since the government's enactment March 5 of its latest package of cuts, estimated at €4.8 billion, the unions have halted even the limited 24-hour strikes they previously sanctioned. The trade union federations, representing more than half of the five million-strong Greek working class, have held no further joint strikes or even a single one-day stoppage since March 11.

On March 15 some of the severest attacks in the austerity programme came into effect, including a hike in the Value Added Tax on many everyday items. The GSSE marked the day by declaring a "Consumer Day" and calling for a nationalist "Buy Greek" campaign.

Since then, workers in several sectors have struck in isolated, sporadic strikes. On March 19, civil engineers, geo-technical engineers and academics at Greece's engineering and agricultural science universities staged a four-hour strike to protest the tax increases announced by PASOK. Doctors employed at state hospitals joined the

protests to demand unpaid wages.

On March 23, lawyers staged a 48-hour strike, and public employees in several sectors held a three-hour stoppage. The limited public sector workers strikes were held to protest pension cuts and other austerity measures and were not called by ADEDY. Involved in the action were postal employees, railway workers, fire fighters and employees of the Hellenic Telecommunications Organization.

Such has been the impact of the union's efforts to demobilise the working class that an evening demonstration in Athens that day was attended by just a few thousand people. These were in the main trade union bureaucrats and members of the various pseudo-left coalitions. This comes a few weeks after over two million workers took part in widely supported one-day general strikes and demonstrations and protests were held in every major town and city.

The trade union bureaucracy has played the key role in enabling the government to introduce its austerity programme despite the opposition of millions of workers. The leadership of both union federations is staffed by high-ranking members of PASOK. They called the one-day general strikes in February and March in order to provide a harmless safety valve for the mounting opposition of the working class to the government. The aim was not to build up a movement of working class opposition, but to pre-empt any such movement and dissipate the anger of workers and youth.

The trade unions' support for PASOK was highlighted at the 34th congress of the GSEE, held March 18-21. On March 19, Prime Minister George Papandreou addressed the congress and announced that there would be no let-up in PASOK's austerity measures. Calling for support for his government's plan, the prime minister said, "Saving the economy and regaining credibility is a necessary precondition to create the country we deserve."

He told the GSEE, “We were forced to take the most difficult decisions ever taken by any government in this country. We are making efforts to reverse this course.... If we do not make sacrifices today, the problem will spiral out of control.”

The assembled delegates applauded the speech, whose clear content was a declaration of war by the Greek bourgeoisie on the working class.

PASOK members made up the majority bloc within the GSEE in the elections held at the congress. The PASOK-affiliated PASKE grouping received 230 votes (48.2 percent) out of 478 votes.

DAKE—the trade union body of the right-wing opposition New Democracy Party—received 118 votes (24.69 percent), and the All Workers Militant Front (PAME), affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece, received 100 votes (20.92 percent). Despite routinely describing the GSEE as a “yellow” union and denouncing its “strike-breaking,” the Stalinists have no compunction in taking seats in the same union’s leadership.

The only differences the union bureaucracies have with PASOK concern the best tactical means to impose the cuts without provoking a backlash. The unions have never raised the demand for a repudiation of the debt owed to the international banks. This year alone, the government will have to raise €53 billion (\$72.4 billion). Some €20 billion of the total, for refinancing old loans, falls due between April 20 and the end of May.

Instead, Yannis Panagopoulos, the president of the GSEE, simply echoes the government’s demand that Greece be able to borrow at lower interest rates. “What we ask is that Greece be able to take loans at the same interest rates as others,” he said.

Last week, GSEE spokesman and executive member Stathis Anestis told the Associated Press, “We have an appreciation of the situation the country is in.... We maintain a realistic and responsible position of readiness.”

In the name of being “realistic,” the union leaders are pledging to do nothing that will impede the implementation of the most drastic attacks on the working class.

In his speech to the GSEE Congress, ADEDY President Spyros Papaspyros presented PASOK as the helpless victim of the global economic crisis. The government “has been trapped in a path that unilaterally lays the burden on those who are not responsible for the crisis,” he said.

Whilst the unions sabotage anti-austerity struggles, the

ruling elite in Greece is making plans to escalate its attacks. As the GSEE conference was underway, representatives of big business and the main political parties attended an investment conference in Athens entitled, “Greece at the Crossroads: Will Reforms Bring Competitiveness and Investment?”

The conference was sponsored by the *International Herald Tribune*, the sister paper of the Greek daily *Kathimerini*. It included keynote speeches from Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou, Alternate Foreign Minister Dimitris Droutsas, and the leader of the New Democracy, Antonis Samaras.

Explaining how the economic crisis should be used to permanently restructure social relations at the expense of the living standards of the working class, Minister of State Haris Pamboukis told the conference, “The economic crisis can be seen as a major opportunity for Greece and Europe to move forward.”

On March 22, *Kathimerini* published a comment imploring the trade unions to come forward as the policemen of the working class. It began by stating, “We are entering a period in which every institution, every group and every individual will have to redefine itself with regard to society as a whole. The economic crisis is the greatest catalyst for change since the military dictatorship of 1967-74 took right-wing authoritarianism to extremes, discrediting it totally as a political and social option.”

Implying that strikes and protests against austerity are similarly “extreme,” *Kathimerini* concluded, “The unions must now take a hard look at themselves and decide whether they will contribute toward Greece’s reformation, with all that this will cost employees, or whether they will keep shouting and marching into irrelevance—at far greater cost to workers.”

Kathimerini is frankly somewhat behind the times. As is already abundantly clear, the trade unions are working to paralyze the working class and stand four-square behind Greece’s ruling elite.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact