

Greek workers insist “The economic crisis was not caused by us”

Our reporters
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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team in Athens spoke to workers at several protests held in the city on Tuesday.

The first was a rally by striking doctors and nurses 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 began at an Athens hospital and has spread to other hospitals with national action expected this week.

The team also spoke to disabled workers, who held a demonstration outside a disability employment office. The protest was demanding jobs, employment rights and vastly increased social benefits for the disabled.

The protests were held as the PASOK government’s latest €4.8 billion austerity package began to be implemented with an increase in Value-Added Tax (VAT) and under conditions where the two main trade union federations, the private sector General Confederation of Workers of Greece (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants’ Confederation (ADEDY), have sabotaged any organised industrial action.

Mariki, a former school secretary and journalist, is now unemployed and studying on a computer skills programme. She told the WSWs about the problems facing disabled people in Greece:

“We are protesting because we want money from the government. We want work for blind people and disabled. We want medicines and education provision for blind people. The government is only interested in those with money and they don’t care about our social problems. The problems we face are that we have no money and we are unemployed. We have special needs so we are protesting to the Greek government.

“I only get a small amount from the government, €550, but I am not paying any rent because I lived with my parents. Out of that we have to pay for all our equipment and other needs, and sometimes these are very expensive. A cane for a blind person can cost €50 or more.

“PASOK doesn’t support people with special needs. In other countries there is a lot more support for disabled people than in Greece. I didn’t vote in the last election because I don’t agree with the government solution to social problems and the environmental problems. The politicians don’t represent us. A lot of people in the elections think that PASOK would be a change, but it is not. PASOK only represents rich people.”

Nick Pouiros, a musician and part-time student said, “The protest is to tell the government that our main need is to find a job. They have made a lot of attacks on people. Even before the austerity measures they gave the banks €28 billion to save them. We are saying the money that was given to banks could have been given to people without jobs.

“I think the problems we have in Greece are also European and international questions. Only through workers being together can we be successful. Workers of the world unite, as someone said quite a long time ago.”

Dimitris Lissaris said, “I work in a hospital and I have multiple sclerosis. We have problems in education, employment; we have to pay for our therapies and medicines. The main problem we have is

unemployment. Disabled people can be out of the job for years, and their families have to pay for them. They only get a little money from the government, some of them about €200. I think the PASOK government is the same as the previous Karamanlis government. They had the same programme on unemployment, poverty and people with special needs.

“I am paying €350 for rent every month and I only get about €900 in total from my job. With these new price increases life will be very expensive for us, because salaries have gone down. Altogether I have to pay €100 for drugs and the equipment I need to survive. Sometimes it is €150.”

The WSWS spoke to Vassilis at the Health Ministry demonstration. He is a nurse at the Agia Sofia Children hospital in Athens. He said, “This demonstration represents nurses all over Greece. The economic crisis in Greece was not caused by us, the nurses. This crisis was not ours, but it is certainly touching all the rights of nurses.

“We are demanding more nursing staff. I work in intensive care in a children’s hospital and we have two nurses to look after everyone in nine beds. And we are also doing the doctors’ jobs as well. So it is very difficult, it is unbearable now. Salaries are very low for us, we only get €1,200.

“We demand a new administration here in the Health Ministry, so that we can have more staff and better salary. We work under dangerous conditions. People will die. Two nurses in a shift cannot pay attention to 50 or 60 patients.

“About PASOK, they are like every government, they represent the rich people.”

A nurse who worked in public hospital in Athens said, “We are demonstrating because they are reducing our money. We don’t have enough nurses at the hospital so we are forced to work extra hours. We have to work double shifts of 16 hours. The level of the health system is very low, because we don’t have the staff. At least once a week we have to work 16 hours a day. We work on Saturdays and Sundays and we work on Christmas. Our money is very low, and when we worked overtime, we were not paid extra. The government is trying to cut our money in order to cover its budget problem.”

At the Tuesday evening rally in Athens, the WSWS spoke to Vouloa Nika, an unemployed worker currently waiting for promised jobs at the economics ministry. She was protesting with fellow workers, who are also demanding the ministry fulfils their employment obligations to them.

She said, “We passed the test to be employed at the economy ministry. They say now even though we have passed we can’t have the job yet, so we are being held hostages. The problem is we can’t work anywhere else, because we are told ‘Well you are going to leave us in a month or two.’ So nobody will employ us. We took the test in April 2009, and it’s now March 2010, and I studied from summer 2007. We have been told we will be graduate employed from the next semester to 2013. All together there are about 877 involved in this all over Greece, so it is not just in Athens.

“The PASOK government is taking the money from those who earn the least. It is not coming from those who earn €10,000 a month, but from them who earn €1,500. My parents were working in the public sector and are now retired, and I am taking money from them. I don’t have a job and my sister doesn’t have a job. How are we supposed to survive? I have been unemployed for about four years now, and you can only get unemployment benefit for a year. So I am relying on my parents.

“The only thing we can do is protest. This is the only weapon we have. I agree with you the economic crisis is affecting everyone all over the world. In the US a lot of companies have been closed, there is a lot of unemployment. I think the whole thing was caused by the banks, by the rich people, but we are ones who are paying for their errors.”



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