

Greece: Fourth 24-hour strike against austerity measures

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Tens of thousands of workers protested in towns and cities throughout Greece on May 20 during the latest 24-hour general strike. The strike was in response to the brutal austerity measures being imposed by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government of Prime Minister George Papandreou.

Wednesday's action was the fourth since December. The strike follows that held on May 5 and the subsequent approval the following day by the Greek parliament of the latest €30 billion austerity plan.

Papandreou's policies, agreed with the International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank, will see hundreds of thousands of jobs lost, workers taking initial pay cuts of 20 percent or more, and social services and pensions gutted.

The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSSE), which represents workers in the private sector and the Civil Servants' Confederation federation (Adedy), called the stoppage. The PAME trade union federation, affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece, also participated. PAME members held a separate march in Athens city centre to that organised by the GSSE/Adedy, but did not proceed to march to the parliament.

During the strike, transport networks throughout the country were brought to a halt. In Athens the rail, subway, bus and tram systems came to a standstill, resulting in large traffic jams. Tourist sites including the ancient Acropolis were also closed.

Government buildings, schools, post offices, shipping and construction sites were also hit by the strike. Hospitals operated mainly with a minimal level of staff and took emergency cases only.

Olympic Air was forced to cancel more than 15 domestic flights due to a strike by civil aviation workers at smaller local airports. Ferries and other

ships were kept in port or prevented from docking in the harbour of Greece's busiest and largest port, Piraeus.

The GSEE reported on its website that the strike had been supported by 100 percent of workers in some sectors. At the ThyssenKrupp-owned Hellenic Shipyards SA the union reported 100 percent support. Support at this level was also reported at oil refineries and at ports. At banks, post offices and train stations the federation said that 70 percent of workers participated in the stoppage.

AFP reported that some private banks in Athens remained open. This was despite the fact that during the last general strike, three Marfin bank employees were killed as the result of a firebombing in a still, unexplained incident.

In Athens, up to 20,000 protesters participated in the demonstrations. Marching to the parliament building many in attendance chanted anti-government slogans including "Come out, you thieves". Workers also carried a banner reading, "These measures take us 150 years back".

Riot police maintained an intimidating presence on the streets of the capital, as has been the norm since the beginning of the protests and strikes against the government's austerity measures. As many as 1,700 extra riot police were ordered into central Athens, sealing off parts of the city to protesters. As part of their operation, they detained nearly 100 people during the morning on the sidelines of the demonstration.

In the second largest city, the northern port of Thessaloniki, about 10,000 people joined two marches.

Workers speaking to the international press stressed their continuing opposition to the government's policies. The *Wall Street Journal* reported the comments of Eleni Mitsou, a 31-year-old worker. She

said, “We are striking against the measures the government agreed to with the IMF and the EU that do not allow us to survive. With the new measures, new entrants into the workforce will have their starting wage cut to €560 from €740, and they can’t live on that”.

Another worker, Maria Grigoropoulou, said, “We want the government to take back these measures which freeze our pay rises and force us to stay longer in the workforce. We will continue our struggle and we will not back down”.

Protester Nikos Galiatsatos, who is 26 and unemployed, said, “These measures are destroying everything we have fought for. Where are the measures against unemployment? We were not the ones who created this crisis”.

The bitter opposition of workers to the austerity measures and the Papandreou government was in stark contrast to the trade union bureaucracy. As with the general strikes before them, the sole purpose of yesterday’s strike was to quell the mounting anger against the Papandreou government. The unions fully supported the election of the PASOK government and are only concerned with how best to ensure that opposition within the working class is diverted into safe channels

Whilst calling the strike, GSEE/Adedy and PAME have worked to ensure that the movement against the austerity policies does not develop into a political confrontation with the government. The union bureaucracy is fully aware that a strike every six weeks or so will do—and has done—nothing to prevent the ruling elite from implementing its agenda of “drawing blood” from the working class. This is why PASOK has so far been able to pass four savage austerity packages since December on behalf of international finance capital.

Even those stoppages that the unions have sanctioned have been held with extreme reluctance, with no attempt even to call out all their members. In a number of cases, the trade unions have called on their members to work during the strikes in order not to damage the Greek economy.

During yesterday’s action, international flights departing Athens functioned normally as the majority of civil aviation unions opposed the strike. A spokesman for the air traffic controllers union said they were boycotting the general strike as, “We don’t want

to cause any damage to the tourism industry”.

Due to national university entrance examinations being held this week, trade unions also instructed some secondary school teachers not to join the strike.

Despite journalists joining the previous strikes, media trade unions also decided that they would postpone industrial action yesterday. Unions said that this was necessary in order for the general strike to receive coverage and publicity in the press.

Even as the strike took place, spokesmen from the Adedy federation and PAME both stated that the only future action being considered were possible, unspecified strikes in June and during the summer.

Ilias Iliopoulos, the general secretary of Adedy, said, “If the pension bill is left unchanged, we will certainly protest in June. And if the government takes more harmful measures, the summer will also be a period of labour action”.

Lefteris Papaconstantopoulos, a member of the PAME union executive committee, said, “We have said that we have to escalate our industrial action against these unfair policies, so there will be more strikes, protests and gatherings in June”.

The government’s pension bill is expected to be passed by parliament in early June. The bill proposes to slash the value of pensions, raise the retirement age and remove the entitlements of thousands of workers who currently receive them.



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