

Greece trade unions intensify collaboration with austerity measures

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Even as the austerity measures of Greece's PASOK government of Prime Minister George Papandreou produce deepening widespread poverty, the trade union federations are working to ensure that all opposition is strangled.

More than six months after the first austerity bill was passed in December and despite massive public opposition, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY) have isolated the struggles of workers in various industries and rendered them virtually harmless.

In the last few weeks railway, media and public transport workers have taken strike action in separate stoppages. Last Wednesday, Athens Metro staff stuck for 24 hours to oppose the sacking of 285 temporary workers whose contracts have been terminated. Greek tourist employees also staged a four-hour strike to protest planned job losses.

On Thursday, all public transport workers in Athens staged a five-hour stoppage and held a rally in opposition to the government's attacks on pension rights and the cutting of salaries and benefits. Greek railways staff also held a five-hour work stoppage to protest plans by the government to cut pensions and privatise the state railway company.

The alienation of the mass of working people from the trade unions was evident at the GSEE/ADEDY rally in Athens on Wednesday, when just 1,000 people participated.

Aware that there will be no serious opposition from the trade unions, the government has continued to impose further attacks. On June 16 a presidential decree was announced allowing firms employing more than 150 employees to fire 5 percent of their total workforce per month. It also cuts by 50 percent the compensation

for laid-off employees and allows a shorter period of notice to be given. The decree slashes the current minimum wage that under 25-year-olds will earn in their first job.

The GSEE merely stated that the measures were "unconstitutional" and it may take the case to Greek or European courts. It invited the main employers group to continue negotiations on a new national collective labour agreement, even as the governments' measures are set to be passed into law.

The latest strikes took place as a team of inspectors from the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank (ECB) reported that the Greek government was imposing the necessary attacks on working people that were demanded in exchange for the three-year, €110 billion (US\$134.9 billion) loan package. A statement from the inspectors said, "While the mission did not undertake a comprehensive review at this time, its discussions suggest that the programme is on track and that the policies are being implemented as agreed."

The ECB auditor, Klaus Masuch, warned, "Greek people have to go through a difficult time."

Last month Greece received a first payment of €20 billion to pay off debts that are due. In order to receive a further €9 billion, the austerity policies will be fully measured in a first comprehensive review to be completed by August 30. Even with the austerity packages previously announced, it is by no means assured that Greece will be able to meet its debt payments. On June 14 Moody's cut Greece's credit rating to junk status, concluding that it doubted the government's ability to deal with its debt crisis even with the European Union/IMF loans.

Moody's senior analyst Sarah Carlson said, "The macroeconomic and implementation risks associated

with the (EU/IMF) programme are substantial and more consistent with a Ba1 rating.”

Carlson added, “There is considerable uncertainty surrounding the timing and impact of these measures on the country’s economic growth, particularly in a less supportive global economic environment.”

Standard & Poor’s reduced its debt rating for Greece to junk status in April.

The GSEE and ADEDY have announced a 24-hour general strike to be held on June 29. This action would be just the fifth this year. The purpose of such token actions is to contain public opposition by providing an opportunity for workers to let off steam. They allow the trade union bureaucracy to make a few criticisms of this or that austerity measure, while maintaining their full support for a government.

Announcing the strike, Ilias Iliopoulos, general secretary of ADEDY, said, “The protest is primarily about the pension system reform”.

Yannis Panagopoulos, the head of the GSEE, said in a June 15 interview that “if the government continues this policy without building a consensus, it can lead to a phenomenon of blind, uncontrollable clashes.”

Mapping out the strategy of the bureaucracy to ensure that PASOK is able to remain in control in collusion with the unions, Panagopoulos said, “There will be more general strikes, especially due to pension reform... And that means at least two more strikes, *depending on negotiations*, one before [pension reforms are voted on] and then when the bill is voted on” (emphasis added).

Conservative and reactionary to the core, the nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of the bureaucracy is the main obstacle to workers developing an independent political offensive against the PASOK regime.

A recent Reuters article included comments from Zoe Lanara, the GSEE’s international relations secretary. Its author Jonathan Lynn commented, “Lanara said Greek unions fully recognised the *critical state of the economy, but whatever arguments could be made for tackling the public sector*, the government had no reason to interfere in the wages and conditions of private companies.” Lanara said, “There is nothing to justify the intervention in the private sector” (emphasis added).

The financial elite, their media backers and the PASOK government have continuously railed against a

“bloated” public sector that is populated by too many overpaid and “lazy” workers in order to justify and impose the most brutal attacks. In so many words the GSEE repeats this propaganda. Lanara’s comments should not, of course, be taken to mean that the GSEE will do anything mobilise private sector workers.



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