

Greek workers in fifth 24-hour strike against austerity measures

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Tens of thousands of workers protested in several cities and towns in Greece on Tuesday during the latest 24-hour strike. The stoppage, the fifth since December, was in response to the austerity measures being imposed by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government of Prime Minister George Papandreou.

PASOK is imposing drastic attacks on the working population in exchange for a €110 billion three-year loan from the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank. Under its terms, the government is planning to cut its budget deficit from 13.6 percent of gross domestic product to under 3 percent of GDP by 2014. The austerity measures will see hundreds of thousands of jobs lost, pay cuts of 20 percent or more imposed, and social services and pensions gutted.

On Friday, the PASOK cabinet approved legislation aimed at slashing pension rights, social benefits and pay, while vastly reducing workers' employment protection. The attacks on pensions include increasing the number of contribution years from 37 to 40 and raising the retirement age for women from 60 to 65. The bill also freezes pensions in 2011-2013 and merges the many existing funds into just three. The legislation implements as well financial penalties to prevent workers taking early retirement in jobs that are arduous.

The legislation will now be voted on in parliament with a debate scheduled to last more than a week, beginning on Tuesday. Amid speculation that some PASOK deputies are considering opposing the measures, Papandreou has threatened to call early elections if the measures are not supported by all deputies.

The Greek government also warned Monday that it is to impose a three-year pay freeze for the lowest-paid

workers in the private sector. The employers' federation and the GSEE workers' confederation are currently involved in talks on a collective pay agreement for workers in the private sector. PASOK spokesman George Petalotis said the pay freeze would be imposed without a settlement being reached. "This decision has been made", he said. "The way it's going to be carried out is an editorial matter."

The government is well aware that it can count on the trade union bureaucracy to sanction such draconian attacks. In a recent interview, Yiannis Panagopoulos, the president of GSEE, said, "If employers could guarantee me that there would be no retrenchments then I would go along—as hard as it would be—to accept a three-year wage freeze".

Tuesday's strike severely hit transport nationwide as workers employed by the state Hellenic Railways Organisation struck for 24 hours, whilst Piraeus-Kifissia urban electric railway, bus and trolley buses staff held partial stoppages.

Strikes by workers at the Athens airport led to the cancellation of around 100 domestic flights. The air traffic controllers' union did not support the strike, and as a result, international flights were not affected by the action and operated as scheduled.

Most public services and schools closed, and hospitals operated with a skeleton staff. Journalists began a 24-hour stoppage, and as a result, no newspapers are to be published Wednesday. News bulletins were also taken off the air.

On Monday, Public Power Corporation workers hung banners at the front of the company's headquarters in central Athens and staged a protest.

Up to 20,000 people demonstrated in Athens, chanting anti-government slogans before marching to the parliament building in Syntagma Square. Riot

police were again mobilised, attacking demonstrators with tear gas and stun grenades in the square. According to an Associated Press report, the police claimed that 13 demonstrators were detained and 6 arrested. In one case, AP reported, “an AP photographer saw police detain one young man in a subway car, spraying him with pepper spray.”

As with previous strikes, PAME, the trade union federation affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece, held a separate march and rally from that of the GSEE/ADEDY in Athens.

Two seamen’s unions belonging to PAME took strike action and staged blockades at the main port of Piraeus during the day in an attempt to prevent people from boarding ferries to the Aegean islands. The action had been declared illegal the day before after the president of the Association of Greek Coastal Shipping Companies met with a Supreme Court prosecutor.

Last week, the two unions also blockaded the port, which proceeded despite being ruled illegal. During that action, thousands of passengers were stranded at Piraeus. The unions are part of the 14-strong Panhellenic Seamen’s Federation. The other 12 unions did not support either strike.

The blockade affected several hundred passengers who were unable to board ferries. The Civil Protection Ministry said that all ships scheduled to sail in the morning did leave the port.

The latest strike follows the visit to Athens by Poul Thomsen, the head of the IMF’s Greek monitoring team. In an interview with the *Vima* newspaper, he stressed his support for the government’s “ambitious” austerity measures.

Thomsen said, “Such an adjustment is not easy and often causes discontent,” adding, “The effort has begun vigorously and I firmly believe that Greece will succeed.”

Opposition to the austerity programme is growing within Greece. According to an opinion poll for the *Proto Thema* daily, 64.8 percent of those questioned said the pension restructuring would make the country’s pension funds unviable. Only 21.6 percent of respondents believed the pension changes would be beneficial.

The latest strike is once again a confirmation of the reactionary role of the Greek trade unions, which seek to ensure that the PASOK regime is able to remain in

the saddle. Since December, the unions have called these selective, token strikes and made a few statements feigning their opposition to this or that measure. The strikes are called not as a means to mobilise the working class, but in order to allow workers’ growing anger to be dissipated.

Speaking on Tuesday, GSEE head Panagopoulos claimed, “It was a very large gathering and march and strike participation is higher than at other times.” He added, “Naturally we will strike next Wednesday or Thursday again *when the bills will be voted on in parliament*” (emphasis added).

This sums up the role of the union bureaucracy in propping up PASOK. Union leaders know very well that these sporadic, limited strikes have enabled the government to implement all its austerity measures over the past six months.

In ruling circles, those who follow Greek events are very conversant with the demobilising role of the trade union bureaucracy.

In a recent blog comment posted on The Source, a European news site of the *Wall Street Journal*, Nick Skrekas described Panagopoulos as “not a hot head who fires off needless threats of industrial action”. He added that “he is a realist and deep down probably acknowledges that the bulk of the changes will be implemented despite his protests, rallies and strikes.”

Skrekas warned that the government’s measures may result in protests involving a “one-million-strong horde of unemployed people taking to the streets by the end of this year”.

He continued, “The union chief hints that his protests and strikes are a safety valve allowing some of the societal steam to be released before this potential explosion occurs. It doesn’t appear that he’s convinced that his industrial action will make any difference other than at the margin of policy.”



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