

Greece: Sixth general strike as PASOK passes austerity package

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Tens of thousands of workers protested Thursday during the sixth general strike this year in Greece. The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY) called the action to protest the austerity measures of Prime Minister George Papandreou's Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government.

The government is implementing the attacks in order to secure a €110 billion three-year loan from the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

PASOK is committed to slashing the budget deficit from 13.6 percent of gross domestic product to under 3 percent of GDP by 2014. The austerity measures mean the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the gutting of social services and pensions and pay cuts of 20 percent or more.

The protests were held to coincide with a vote scheduled later in the day in parliament. The legislation imposes new austerity measures, including draconian attacks on pensions. The bill authorises increases in the retirement age to 63.5 years by 2015 from 61.4 now, penalises those workers who retire earlier and raises the early retirement age to 60. In some cases, women who were able to retire at 50 will now have to work until 65. Pension funds are to be merged and the number of "arduous" professions that qualify for early retirement will be reduced.

The legislation also makes it easier to fire workers and lowers basic salaries.

According to the government, pensions will be cut by about seven percent. Research by the GSEE refuted this, showing that pensions would fall by 12 percent.

On Wednesday the parliament voted by a majority of 159 to 137 to approve the initial reading of the bill. The bill was passed on Thursday evening with no

opposition from any of PASOK's 157 deputies in the 300-seat house. Reports during the lead-up to the vote suggested it could be delayed due to a strike by administrative staff at the Greek parliament whose pensions are also to be cut.

The government has been able to implement such massive attacks due to the role of the trade union bureaucracy. The trade unions have called six one-day general strikes in seven months. These protest actions have been used as a form of social control—to let off steam, while PASOK carries out its attacks.

Commenting prior to the strike, Stathis Anestis, a leader of the GSEE said, "Workers don't want to strike every week but they can't stand by and watch their fundamental rights being obliterated every week either".

But this is precisely what the unions have done as the government has been allowed to pass bill after bill, tearing up the living standards of workers and social gains won over decades. At every stage the unions have worked closely with the government, whose election they supported, in order to ensure the austerity programme is carried out.

Speaking prior to the Thursday vote, Anestis sought to give the austerity measures a democratic facade. "It's also more democratic to have the whole bill debated in parliament rather than pushing it through as a presidential decree," he said.

An indication of the scale of the attacks contained in the legislation was the comment which appeared in *Eleftheros Typos*. "This is Black Thursday. As of tomorrow nothing will be the same. Greece is changing and sinking into a period of Middle Ages for labour," it stated.

The two unions held separate marches in the capital Athens and another was held by PAME, the trade union

federation affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE). According to organisers some 20,000 people participated in the Athens protests. In the northern city of Thessaloniki an estimated 5,000 people took part.

In Athens, demonstrators carried placards reading, “Keep your hands off social security and pensions” and “Enough is enough: Together we can beat the austerity plan”.

Others read, “Give the money you stole back” and “We do not cry, we do not get afraid, we will block your measures.”

As in previous protests, riot police were stationed at key points throughout the city centre, with police buses blocking roads around the parliament building.

Reuters quoted a 54-year-old worker who said she was going to try to retire now in an attempt to prevent the new measures from cutting her pension. “It’s horrible, we paid all our contributions, we paid our taxes, and we are not going to get anything,” she said. “They are destroying everything.”

The GSEE said in a statement that workers’ participation in the industrial action was above 80 percent for many businesses. Transport networks were affected across Greece.

A four-hour strike by air traffic controllers between 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM resulted in dozens of flights being cancelled or delayed at Athens International airport. More than 50 international flights were cancelled. In Athens, trains, buses and trolleys and the Piraeus-Kifissia urban electric railway were also halted. Rail transport workers employed by the Hellenic Railways Organization struck, and ferry services to Greece’s many islands were disrupted due to action by members of the Panhellenic Seamen’s Federation.

Public services were affected nationwide, with central and local government offices closed and other public sector companies forced to operate with skeleton staffing levels. The strikes hit hospitals, with only emergency cases being given treatment. Lawyers, court staff and some shopkeepers supported the strike.

Also striking in a 24-hour action were members of the Athens Journalists’ Union, employed by state broadcasters ANA-MPA.

The European Union gave its support for the austerity measures this week, stating that they were “broadly on track”. However, the EU issued a warning Wednesday

saying that unemployment is set to worsen after reaching a 10-year high of 12.1 percent in February.

A pliant tool of international finance capital and the Greek bourgeoisie, PASOK has imposed all the attacks demanded by the EU, IMF and European Bank. On this basis, Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou was able to announce this week that Greece’s deficit had fallen by 42 percent this year.

According to Greek central bank data, the public spending deficit was 11.5 billion euros in the first half of the year, down from 19 billion euros the previous year. The deficit for the first six months of 2010 stood at 4.9 percent of GDP, inside the IMF target of 5.8 percent.

Despite the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracy and their attempt to demobilise the working class, opposition to the austerity programme remains widespread. A poll published by the Athens daily *To Vima* over the weekend revealed that support for PASOK has fallen to just 23.4 percent, compared with 43.9 percent of the popular vote in general elections last October. Support for the opposition conservative New Democracy party has also fallen drastically, standing at 15.6 percent, down from 33.4 percent in the elections. In the same poll, 29.6 percent said the latest bill should be withdrawn, and 19 percent described the measures it contained as “catastrophic.”



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