

Greek truck drivers defy government

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31 July 2010

Greek truck drivers decided on Friday to continue their five-day national strike, following a series of punitive measures by the social democratic government of Prime Minister George Papandreou aiming to break their action.

The indefinite strike began on Monday, when 33,000 licensed truck drivers stopped work to protest a decision by the government to revoke their system of licensing trucks. Under the existing system, truckers pay the state up to €100,000-200,000 to purchase a license to own and run their trucks. These licenses can then be resold by the truck owners.

The introduction of a new system by the government aimed at cutting the price of licenses would bankrupt many drivers. Haralambos Daditsios, a leader of the truck drivers union, said: "The state sold us these licenses, our jobs. Some people had to sell their houses to get one of these licenses ... We want justice."

The revocation of the truckers' licensing system is part of the catalogue of demands made by the European Union and International Monetary Fund as conditions for their €110 billion (\$142 billion) bailout package for Greece, secured in early May. In exchange for a further €9 billion tranche of aid in September, the EU and IMF are demanding that the Greek government crack down on so-called "closed professions," such as the truck drivers.

On Monday officials from the EU, IMF and the European Central Bank arrived in Athens to begin a two week visit aimed at examining the books of the Greek government. On the same day, thousands of Greek truck drivers parked their trucks on the side of the road, lining the highways into Athens and across the country.

As the strike began to bite, with fuel running out at many petrol stations, the government retaliated on Wednesday and issued a civil mobilization order to legally compel drivers of trucks—especially those

transporting fuel and perishable goods—to resume work.

The government directive ordered striking truckers to return to work or face prison. Refusal to obey the directive carries penalties of up to five years imprisonment, and the likelihood of drivers having their license revoked. In 2006, the previous right-wing New Democracy government used those same powers to end an extended seamen's strike.

At the same time, prefectures began issuing orders to requisition individual truck owners' services and their vehicles in order to restore deliveries. Greek Finance and Transport Minister George Papaconstantinou told the press: "No special interest group could be allowed to paralyse the country," making clear that his ministry would support mass requisitioning of trucks, should the strike continue.

The truck drivers defied government demands to end their action, and early on Thursday around 500 striking drivers clashed with police on outside the Greek Transport Ministry in Athens. The drivers had attempted to storm the ministry in protest against the civil mobilization order. Police used tear gas to turn back the strikers. On Friday, the drivers declared their determination to continue their strike.

At the end of its first week, the strike has led to severe fuel shortages across the country and massive queues at gas stations. Greek media report that more than 95 percent of gas stations in the greater Athens area are out of fuel, and the majority of them in the northern city of Thessaloniki have also run dry. The situation is similar throughout the rest of the country.

In addition to the disruption to fuel distribution, the delivery of other goods—including supplies of food to Greek islands—is also being affected. The dispute is anticipated to have serious repercussions for the tourist industry, which provides up to 20 percent of the country's GDP and one in five jobs. Hotel and holiday cancellations are already down, after a series of strikes

and protests by workers in May.

The slump in revenues from tourism, estimated by some experts at €1 billion in 2010, adds to Greece's economic woes, following the introduction of a €30 billion austerity program by the government in May.

The truck drivers' militancy is a sign of broader struggles to come. Other groups belonging to so-called "closed professions" are also being targeted by the government—such as engineers, lawyers and pharmacists and will be impelled to take action. Already this year, broad sections of Greek workers and youth have taken to the streets to protest the policies of the Papandreu government.

An effective struggle against the government has been sabotaged at every stage, however, by the trade unions, whose leaderships are largely drawn from Papandreu's PASOK party and who supported his election. They have negotiated the cuts with Papandreu, while organizing periodic strikes to encourage among the workers the false view that such strikes might encourage Papandreu to limit his social cuts. They have suppressed all independent struggle by the working class against the government, the EU, and the banks.

This betrayal of the working class allowed the Papandreu government to proceed with its cuts, with a devastating impact on the population.

Recent figures revealed that the Greek economy shrank by 3 percent between April and June this year, and analysts anticipate that this collapse will accelerate in the coming period. The current rate of inflation of five percent was higher than expected, and inflation figures will rise again, due to the second rise in value-added tax—a type of sales tax—on July 1st. This measure increased VAT in Greece to a record level of 23 percent.

Economic analysts expect the combined austerity measures introduced by the government will reduce average purchasing power by 30 percent this year.



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