

Greek military mobilised to break truck drivers strike

Robert Stevens
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The decision by the social democratic PASOK government to use the military to break a nationwide strike by truck drivers is a stark indication of the polarisation of class relations in Greece and throughout Europe.

The 33,000 truck drivers stopped work on Monday in protest at government plans to revoke the current system of licensing trucks. The change threatens many owner-operators with bankruptcy.

The measure is part of a series of demands for the “liberalisation” of so-called “closed-shop” professions, including haulage, laid down by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund as part of the austerity package to be imposed in return for the EU-IMF €110 billion (\$142 billion) bailout package for Greece.

Late Sunday night it was announced that the truck drivers had voted by a narrow margin to call off their strike. For days, the drivers had faced down the hostile propaganda of the government and its supporters, the mobilisation of the army to move gasoline and other critical supplies, and attacks by riot police on picket lines. The strike had crippled the Greek economy, causing fuel shortages across the country and food shortages on the Greek islands.

Last Friday, the drivers defied a government directive ordering them to return to work or face prison. But they received no serious support from the national trade union federations, which did nothing to mobilize the rest of the working class in their defence. The trade union leadership worked from the outset to isolate the strike and bring it to a rapid end, leaving the truckers to face the full force of the state on their own.

The six-day action contains critical lessons and must be taken by the working class as a whole as a warning of the preparations being made by Europe’s political

elite to deal with growing social unrest.

On Wednesday, as the strike led to a shortage of fuel, PASOK Prime Minister George Papandreou issued a civil mobilisation order “to end a strike that has caused serious disruption to economic and social life.”

The order, based on a law that goes back to World War II, allows for the compulsory provision of services. It meant that the striking truckers were either to return immediately to work or face having their trucks requisitioned and being imprisoned for up to five years.

A statement by Transport Minister Dimitris Reppas underscored how all the official political parties, most particularly the social democrats, now function openly as instruments of state repression against the working class. “The state is not unfortified and society is not defenceless,” Reppas said.

In a report for the British Broadcasting Corporation, Malcolm Brabant explained that the order meant, in effect, the imposition of “martial law” on the hauliers. He added, “Of all the strikes that have affected Greece during the eight-month-long financial crisis, this is the one that posed the most serious threat to the government’s determination to impose austerity measures and liberalise the economy.”

Throughout the week, riot police clashed with truck drivers at oil refineries. On Thursday, police fired tear gas at hundreds of truckers demonstrating outside the Transport Ministry in Athens. The same day, riot police clashed with pickets outside a refinery in Thessaloniki.

Beginning on Friday, the government brought in the army to move fuel supplies to airports, electricity plants and hospitals. It threatened that navy landing craft would be mobilised if necessary.

The unions played the critical role in ending the strike. In a politically revealing comment following the

issuing of the civil mobilisation order, truck drivers' union president Georgios Tzortzatos told Alter television station, "We are now soldiers of the Greek state and we'll wait to see our orders."

This was a clear signal from the union bureaucracy that it would do everything possible to end the protests.

By Friday, Tzortzatos was openly arguing for an end to the strike. "They [the truck drivers] must consider the difficulties their actions have caused for society at large and the difficult economic conditions that are currently prevailing in Greece," he told the media.

That day, in what the Athens News Agency (ANA) described as a "stormy general meeting" in Athens, strikers had to wait an hour for Tzortzatos to appear and report on his talks with the government.

In a clear indication of the opposition to the bureaucracy's attempts to terminate the action, the ANA reported, "Other voices in the meeting, especially from tanker truck owners, called for a more militant stance, however, and these eventually carried the day."

ANA indicated that the union had tried to get agreement to hold a secret ballot on continuing the action, but this was rejected. "A vote in favour of continuing to strike was taken after roughly three hours of debate, and not by secret ballot but by a show of hands," said ANA.

The truckers then marched to Parliament to protest, chanting, according to another report, "Our [union] president is mad."

Saturday's *Le Monde* reported the leader of the gas section of the truck drivers' union, Giorgios Tsamos, saying, "We will not let our members go to jail or get arrested. I think that starting this afternoon, the resupply of gas stations will pick up again." At the same time, he warned that he could not "be answerable for the reaction of union members, who are very upset."

Drivers voted by a small majority Sunday to end the strike on the proviso that the government would withdraw the civil mobilisation order. According to ANA, drivers "warned that they will resume strike action if the government failed to honour its side of the bargain."

Neither the private sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) nor the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), which represent several million workers, organised a single strike or

protest in support of the drivers. The GSEE has spent the last several weeks concluding an agreement with the PASOK government that imposes a pay cut on its 2 million members.

The intervention of the army into the political life of Greece—a country that was ruled by a military junta from 1967 to 1974—must serve as a warning to the working class. The last surviving officer of the junta recently said, "In our time, there was no debt. Not one drachma went astray. The Greeks are not disciplined like the Germans or the British. They need authority."

Commenting on the austerity measures being imposed by PASOK he warned, "We are neither at the middle nor at the end of political developments ... we are at the beginning."

Over recent months, tens of billions of euros in cuts have been announced by governments in Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany and Romania. In the face of the social opposition these measures are generating, the ruling elite is preparing to resort to repressive, extra-parliamentary means, including the military, to impose the requirements of international finance capital. In June, attempts were made by the Spanish social democratic PSOE government to use the army against striking metro workers in Madrid.

Every attempt by workers to defend their jobs, wages and livelihoods is now directly and immediately a political struggle against the capitalist state and its political agents, including the trade unions.



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