

Greece: Union betrayal of truck driver's strike sets stage for further attacks

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3 August 2010

The Greek trade unions' betrayal of a six-day nationwide strike by 33,000 truck drivers has set the stage for the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) regime of Prime Minister George Papandreou to step up its offensive against the entire working class.

Late Sunday the truck drivers union, the Panhellenic Union of Commercial Land Transportations (PSXEM) succeeded in getting a narrow majority of workers to call off the strike. They voted an agreement accepting all the original demands of the social-democratic PASOK government.

The strike began on July 26, when 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 for a license to own and run their trucks. The truck owners can then resell these licenses. Many drivers feared that the measures, aimed at the "liberalisation" of so-called "closed-shop" professions, would bankrupt them or even cost them their licenses. Liberalisation was one of the conditions set down by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund as part of their €110 billion (\$142 billion) bailout package for Greece.

Such is the strategic importance of the trucking sector that the industrial action soon crippled the economy, causing fuel shortages across the country and food shortages on the Greek islands. By the weekend, there were reports that 95 percent of gas stations in the greater Athens area were out of fuel, with a similar situation in the second-largest city of Thessaloniki.

On the third day of the strike, the government had enacted emergency legislation, in the form of a Civil Mobilisation Order. Under this order, drivers were required to return to work immediately or face having their trucks requisitioned and being imprisoned for up to five years.

Even so, the drivers refused to accept the order and stepped up the strike action, voting again to continue the strike on Friday. The army was mobilised in response, and

military vehicles were requisitioned to supply fuel to airports, hospitals and power stations. As riot police continued to assault truckers at protests and demonstrations, other heavily-armed police units escorted trucks to refineries.

Under conditions in which the drivers' action posed a serious challenge to PASOK's austerity programme, the trade unions came forward to ensure the strike was isolated and ultimately defeated.

On Friday PSXEM President Georgios Tzortzatos warned the drivers they had to "consider the difficulties their actions have caused for society at large".

The PSXEM was supported in its demobilisation of the strike by Greece's two trade unions federations. Neither the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) nor the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), who together represent several million workers, organised a single strike or protest in support of the drivers. The GSEE's website did not run a single article or statement about the dispute.

Throughout the increasingly bitter strike, PSXEM had continued to negotiate with the Transport Ministry, and on Sunday it called on the drivers to return to work. Despite the intense pressure from the government and media, the army mobilisation and the perfidious role of the unions, only a narrow majority of truckers voted to return to work.

According to reports, Tzortzatos agreed to call off the strike if the government agreed to withdraw the civil mobilization order. Late Sunday evening the government, implicitly acknowledging that the unions had succeeded in beheading the protests, agreed to withdraw the order.

The statement issued by PSXEM ending the action read: "Taking into account the problems that have been caused by the non-supply of the market with food, fuel and other products, it was decided with a sense of responsibility by a narrow majority to call off the strike".

In citing the need to ensure the functioning of "the market", the PSXEM statement was virtually identical to that of the government. Government spokesman Giorgos

Petalotis said the strike had to be terminated because, “We have an obligation to keep the markets open”.

Moreover, the “sense of responsibility” expressed by PSXEM refers to its duty to the government and the state to act against the interests of its own members.

The Greek daily *Kathemerini* said that with the agreement, the government has “made it clear to the drivers that it will not negotiate a 2013 deadline for opening up their profession so that the number of licenses issued is no longer restricted”. The report added that Transport Minister Dimitris Reppas said he would be “willing to talk about the possibility” of “tax breaks, adjustments to their social security benefits, and the possibility of drivers being able to get business development loans at special rates.”

The draft law outlining the government plans is to be submitted next month. As part of the agreement, Reppas said he would hold further talks with the unions “on the condition that they do not call another strike”, *Kathemerini* reported.

In other words, the main plank of the government’s plan—to open up the road freight sector to further competition and deregulation—has been fully accepted by the drivers unions.

Transport Minister Reppas alluded that the defeat of the truck drivers was critical to the Greek government continuing to receive loans to pay off its massive public sector debt: “There is no alternative solution but to open up the profession, because we have promised it to the IMF and EU”.

The truckers strike coincided with the visit to Athens of a 30-strong team from so-called “troika”—the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF. Their purpose was to further assess the implementation of the government’s austerity programme, on the “success” of which the approval of a further €9 billion loan depends.

Commenting on the visit, the *Financial Times* said, “The so-called ‘troika’ is understood to have pressed for swifter liberalisation of product and service markets. The next round of liberalisation will cover lawyers, notaries, pharmacists, architects, civil engineers and accountants.” Another of the demands is the sale and eventual breaking up of the Public Power Corporation, which employs thousands of workers.

Headlines in Greek newspapers Monday also referred to the government’s plans to slash thousands more jobs in the Public Utilities and Organisations (DEKO). PASOK has plans in place to make cost savings of around €500 million by merging 900 public sector organisations, and abolishing hundreds of services and departments.

Adesmeytos Typos commented that cutting thousands of jobs in DEKO is “in line with the Troika’s orders for putting the bloated state in order”.

Since December PASOK has passed successive austerity programmes despite rising anger in the working class. The government has only been able to implement the tens of billions of euros in cuts due to the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy and their supporters among the fake-left groups.

Each attack on the working class emboldens the ruling elite to demand yet further attacks. In June Antonis Kamaris of Levant Partners, an investment group demanded that the Greek government continue to “remove benefits that have built up like a ship accumulates barnacles”.

The defeat of the truck drivers is being hailed by ruling circles in Greece as crucial to their long-term objectives. Liberalising the “closed” professions was critical to the future of a competitive Greek economy, stated Yannis Stournaras of the Athens-based IOBE think tank: “It is even more important than fiscal stabilization, because it is the operation of the market which is hindered. When these markets open, GDP will be much higher”.

However, others have noted that the government’s austerity programme is far from over, and that many more sections of the working class will be forced into conflict.

Speaking of the upcoming conflicts with the Public Power Corporation, Seraphim Seferiades, assistant professor of political science at Panteion University, said: “This will be a very difficult battle. The government may seem to dominate now. But it would be wrong to assume all will be calm from now on.

“The truckers were a disparate group, and it was easy for the government to beat them on the communication front. But we may see strikes that are tougher and anything can easily spark social tensions.”

Whilst Seferiades correctly anticipates further class conflict as the government escalates its offensive, the experiences of the Greek truck drivers must serve as a warning as to the future course of these struggles. In Greece and across Europe, the trade unions are working to dissipate and betray workers resistance to austerity measures.

The struggle against austerity involves a political struggle against the official political parties and their state apparatus, which includes the trade unions. It requires the building of new organisations of working-class struggle in opposition to the unions, based on a perspective of fighting for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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