

Greek unions posture as opponents of privatisation

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A recent comment by Greek trade union leaders highlights the political problems facing workers opposed to the austerity policies enforced by Greece's PASOK government, led by Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou, to slash state spending amid the Greek debt crisis.

The comment came after the so-called "troika" of Greece's financial overseers—the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB)—announced the restructuring of the DEKO, Greece's stated-owned Public Companies and Organisations. Greece's public debt increased by €13 billion, or 5.5 percent, as a result, as DEKO debts are now included in public debt calculations.

The deal sets the stage for massive job cuts. A bill has already been drafted to restructure Greece's state-owned railway company OSE. In a recent statement, Transport and Infrastructure Minister Dimitris Reppas wrote, "[A]ccording to the recovery programme, it is estimated that OSE needs a headcount of 4000. This means that 2500 workers can be utilised differently. Out of those 2500 around 1500 can be pensioned off in 2011-2012. This means that there remain 800-1000 workers, for whom the discussion involves whether they'll be made redundant or transferred to other services".

In response, the private-sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) union released a statement, noting that the recovery plan "automatically means the abolishing of jobs." It concluded, "[W]e will not allow the government and its taskmaster 'conquerors' to blow up fundamental labour rights. In this instance as well, we are raising our voice on the side of rail network workers, shouting 'Molon Labe!'"

"Molon Labe" ("Come and take them") is a famous

Classical Greek phrase, uttered by King Leonidas before the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 bce. It was his response to the invading Persian army's demand that his 300 Spartan soldiers, guarding a key mountain pass, should surrender. Vastly outnumbering the Spartans, the Persians ultimately killed all Leonidas's troops, but the battle bought the other Greek armies critical time to prepare to repel the invaders. The battle of Thermopylae is usually seen as a famous example of a gallant last stand against overwhelming odds.

The GSEE's invocation of Thermopylae is absurd, deceitful phrasemongering. The only parallel between Thermopylae and today is that the GSEE plans for workers to similarly suffer total defeat, in their struggle against the Greek government and the banks. Any resemblance ends there, however.

While Leonidas famously fought the Persians to the death, the GSEE has indeed more than proved itself as the steadfast ally of the government and the "troika".

The social and political connections between union bureaucrats and the ruling class are widely known. GSEE President Yiannis Panagopoulos sits on the national council of PASOK, the government party that is implementing the troika's austerity demands. An employee of the National Bank of Greece since 1974, Panagopoulos is today deputy manager of the bank's Economic Studies Department. He is also a member of the bank's Governing Council.

The unions have no objections to massive job or wage cuts. Shortly before the troika's negotiators arrived in Athens, the GSEE concluded an agreement with the private sector, imposing a three-year pay freeze for its 2 million members. GSEE spokesman Stathis Anestis explained, "This year there will be no wage rises, because it is a particularly difficult year".

Moreover, unlike the Spartans at Thermopylae, the

working class vastly outnumbers the financial aristocracy and big business politicians demanding social cuts in Greece and internationally. The reason it suffers defeats is the inveterate treachery of those like Panagopoulos and Anestis, who falsely claim to be its leaders.

The GSEE has repeatedly proved its fidelity to PASOK, most recently by refusing to organize any solidarity action when the government mobilised the army against striking truck drivers. The truckers' six-day strike had almost brought the economy to a standstill, threatening PASOK's entire austerity agenda.

This year, GSEE has only called five one-day national strikes. Called on a bankrupt perspective of pressuring the government to modify parts of its austerity agenda, these strikes have done nothing to halt the unprecedented attacks on the working class. Workers' income has been cut by a third on average, and in many cases by as much as 50 percent.

In its official statements, the GSEE makes no bones about its ability to police the working class in the interests of finance capital.

At the end of last month the GSEE met with the EU-ECB-IMF delegates, who were in Athens to monitor the progress of PASOK's austerity programme. In a statement after the meeting, it said, "[On] the private sector, the position that was expressed by the president of [GSEE] was precise and categorical...the unions and employer groups can, as they have recently proved, handle via agreements all the issues of salaried employment in the private sector". These matters included salaries, worker relations, arbitration, and pensions.

The unions' blustering reference to Thermopylae is, in fact, designed to cover their class treachery and demoralize the workers, by promoting the feeling that the best workers can hope for is a glorious defeat.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what Leonidas might have done at Thermopylae, so as to behave somehow as the trade unions do today. It would be roughly the following: arriving before the Persian army with a vastly superior force, Leonidas would agree with the Persian king to send his soldiers through the mountain pass, one-by-one and unarmed, so they could be slaughtered.



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