

Army operation against Greek truck drivers: A warning to European workers

Peter Schwarz
4 August 2010

The conscription of striking Greek truck drivers and the deployment of the army as strikebreakers marks a new stage in the attacks on the Greek and European working class.

Up to now, the social democratic government under Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou had largely relied upon the unions to keep resistance against the austerity measures agreed with the European Union and International Monetary Fund under control. The unions have called a series of one-day strikes and protests, while in principle supporting the course being followed by the government.

From the standpoint of the European financial elite, the result has been remarkable. An assessment made by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) of the first four months of austerity measures concludes that the Greek government will succeed in reducing real wages in 2010 by 20-30 percent. This is being achieved through a combination of wage cuts, a VAT (sales tax) increase and rising inflation.

“What the government of Prime Minister Giorgos Papandreou is trying to do is the largest reduction of a budget deficit that has ever been undertaken by a member of the euro-zone in such a short time,” writes ELIAMAP staff writer Jens Bastian in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. “The challenge is like running a marathon at a sprint. Greek society has never experienced such cuts in wages in the past twenty years!”

The truck drivers strike posed a serious threat to the government’s austerity measures. Unlike the actions by workers in the civil service and in industry, whose trade unions called 24-hour stoppages and then sent them back to work without any serious damage to the economy, the six-day strike by some 33,000 truck drivers shut down important sections of the economy.

In particular, the lack of fuel at gas stations coincided with the high season in the tourism industry, one of the country’s main sources of income. But other industries were also severely hampered by the lack of transportation.

By the third day of the strike, the government sought recourse to a rarely used law. It effectively conscripted the strikers into the army by decree, and ordered them to start to work again or face draconian penalties. When the truck drivers opposed this move and sought to continue the strike, the government deployed the army to break the strike and supply airports,

power stations and other facilities with fuel.

The deployment of the army had an immediate effect—not on the strikers, who resisted stubbornly—but on the transport union PSXEM, which had been trying to strike a deal with the government and now has completely capitulated.

The use of the army is particularly significant because memories are fresh in Greece of the brutal military dictatorship that ruled from 1967 to 1974. The Greek colonels carried out a coup on April 21, 1967 in order to prevent an election victory by the bourgeois politician George Papandreou, the grandfather of the current prime minister. Thousands of political opponents were jailed, tortured and killed. George Papandreou himself died in 1968 under house arrest.

After the fall of the dictatorship, some of the colonels were held to account and sentenced to prison terms. If Papandreou’s grandson now deploys the army to break a strike, the military can only understand this as a signal that it is needed once again in order to ensure that “order” is restored in society.

The entire European elite, including in Greece, has responded with satisfaction to Papandreou’s decision to break the truck drivers strike by using coercive measures and mobilizing the army. There was not a word of protest, even from the supposedly left bourgeois parties and trade unions.

In Greece itself, agreement reaches deep into the camp of the petty-bourgeois “left.” Dimitris Papadimoulis, a parliamentary deputy of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), attacked the truck drivers, saying their strike was “taking the form of strangling the market, queues at petrol stations, etc. and does not have any social support.”

Fotis Kouvelis, the leader of a right-wing split-off from SYRIZA, called on the truck drivers to end their strike “in order to facilitate the re-starting of talks, on the basis of abolishing the old closed shop regime,” i.e., on the basis of the government’s demands.

Other representatives of SYRIZA and the Greek Communist Party (KKE) condemned the government’s coercive measures in words, but did not raise a finger to support the truck drivers, who were also isolated by the major trade unions.

The truck drivers are fighting for their survival. Most are owner-operators and have invested their entire life savings (up to €300,000) to buy the required license. The subsequent resale

of the license forms the basis of their pensions. The abolition of the licensing system, as demanded by the government, not only opens up the Greek transport system to the big European haulage firms, destroying the livelihoods of the Greek truck drivers, it also nullifies their pensions at a stroke.

The liberalization of trucking and many other occupations—taxi drivers, lawyers, pharmacists, architects, accountants, etc.—is one of the key conditions demanded by the EU and the IMF in return for the 110-billion-euro aid package for Greece. In this manner, the cost of the financial crisis and the bailout of the banks is to be offloaded onto the poor, the working class and wide layers of the self-employed.

Herein lies the deeper significance of the deployment of the military in Greece. This country is to serve as a testing ground for the implementation of the austerity programmes that are being planned across Europe. These measures are so broad and so severe that they cannot be achieved by democratic means.

Because such large sections of society are involved, including layers that once considered themselves part of the middle class, many of the traditional conservative parties are in crisis. In Germany, Chancellor Merkel's coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) is paralyzed by internal conflicts. In Italy, Berlusconi's governing party (People of Freedom) has broken apart. In France, Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) has slumped in the polls. This is why in many countries the ruling elite is turning to the social democrats and their middle-class "left" satellites to enforce the attacks against the working class.

In Greece, the replacement of the conservative Karamanlis government by Papandreou's PASOK was the precondition for the implementation of the current austerity programme. In Germany, a deliberate campaign is underway to promote the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens. The two parties, ruling in coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, imposed the Agenda 2010 welfare "reforms" which did more to impoverish broad layers of workers than the current conservative government under Angela Merkel (CDU).

But such social democratic governments can only be a temporary solution. They owe their electoral success largely to the decline of the conservatives, the propaganda of the bourgeois media and the support of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-lefts. They have lost their social base among workers and largely rest upon the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions and their own party apparatus. Once in government, they are exposed to the same process of political erosion as the conservatives.

Therefore, efforts are being made to find new, authoritarian forms of rule. These preparations can be seen in one form or another in all European countries.

In Hungary, the right-wing nationalist Fidesz and the openly fascist Jobbik have benefited from the decline of the social democrats and are now seeking to consolidate their rule by

inciting racism, raising tensions with neighboring countries and developing authoritarian structures.

In Holland, the racist Freedom Party of Geert Wilders has provided the majority for the government and will be formally incorporated into the coalition.

And in France, the government is seeking to mobilize the followers of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front through provocative legal initiatives against Roma and Muslims.

The increased social weight being afforded the military is also a general phenomenon. Conscript armies are being replaced by professional armies, which are being brutalized in battle in Afghanistan and in other foreign missions. The use of the military at home is being discussed openly under the pretext of "fighting terrorism." In Germany, an open conflict is raging between the two chambers of the Supreme Court, who are arguing whether such military operations should now be approved following 60 years during which they were banned.

In this context, the use of the military against striking truck drivers in Greece sends a warning to the entire European working class. The extent of the austerity measures that either have been agreed upon or are being planned make violent social conflict inevitable. The Social Democrats, the trade unions and their petty-bourgeois "left" supporters play a key role in enforcing these attacks. By restraining and paralyzing the working class, they give the ruling elite the necessary time to prepare more right-wing and authoritarian forms of rule.

Everything now depends upon working people intervening independently in political events. They must break from the influence of the Social Democrats and trade unions and establish their own party, one that uncompromisingly defends their own interests against the demands of the financial oligarchy.

The political basis of such a party must be an international socialist programme that places the social needs of the mass of the population above the profit demands of the banks and corporations. The International Committee of the Fourth International is building such parties around the world.

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