

Greek culture ministry workers end strike after police attack

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Culture ministry workers employed at the Acropolis in Athens ended a three-day strike Friday, following brutal attacks by riot police.

The workers were protesting the loss of 320 temporary employees, whose contracts expire at the end of the month. They are demanding that the temporary staff be given permanent contracts. The workers were also protesting the non-payment of wages over the last two years, totalling five million euros.

The protest at the Acropolis began on Tuesday and did not initially stop visitors from entering. According to a Sky News report, at least 30 of the workers occupied the Acropolis visitor entrance overnight Wednesday, barricading themselves inside. They changed the padlock on the main gate in order to keep the riot police out.

The police were given a court order allowing them to break up the protest. Speaking in the language of a junta-era general, Deputy Culture Minister Tylemachos Hytiris said, "A prosecutor was called in and orders were issued to clear them out."

On Thursday riot officers armed with batons and shields arrived. They forced their way in via a side entrance, wielding their batons and firing two rounds of pepper spray at protesters. Two of the striking workers were taken away in handcuffs. Despite the brutal treatment, protesters clung onto the gates and defied repeated orders to clear the entrance.

Many tourists who had come to visit the monument witnessed the events in astonishment. A number told the press that while they were frustrated they were not able to gain entry, they sympathised with the plight of the staff.

In an immediate show of solidarity, permanent security guards employed at the Acropolis went on a

one-day strike Thursday in protest at the brutal police attack.

Since the assault, riot police have remained at the entrance to the Acropolis and in the grounds. Those visitors that turned up were allowed in free of charge.

Endorsing the police assault, Tourism Minister George Nikitiades declared, "No one has the right to close the Acropolis site, to block thousands of tourists."

On Friday Prime Minister Georgis Papandreou, of the ruling social democratic PASOK, condemned the action of the workers, stating they had no reason to be protesting. "These workers, whose problems we have solved, padlocked the entrance to the site, obstructing other workers from doing their job and tarnishing the image of the country globally," he told parliament.

The reality is that the culture ministry workers are protesting, as have millions of others over the past year, over the imposition of austerity measures by Papandreou. The centre-piece of the attacks being imposed is a €30 billion cuts package, pushed through in return for a €110 billion bail-out package agreed to in May with the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

The focal point of the cuts is the sacking of thousands of public sector workers, as well as imposing pay cuts across the board. These include the jobs of thousands of temporary staff, such as those employed at historic sites. The job losses at the Acropolis are part of 800 short-term contract jobs that are to go by the end of the month. Pay cuts of seven percent have also being imposed this year, including a 30 percent reduction in salary entitlements usually paid at Easter, during the summer and at Christmas.

Stating that the sacking of temporary workers is vital, Hytiris said Thursday, "We will hold discussions with

the protesters, but we cannot break the law on terminating short-term contracts”.

These attacks and other austerity packages passed in the last year are only the initial stage. Further attacks on the jobs, wages and conditions are imminent, including the break-up of the so-called “closed professions” which employ around 150,000 workers.

Among these are the workers employed by OSE, the state railway organisation. A draft law is currently being discussed by parliament, and is expected to recommend the cutting of rail routes, the selling of OSE real estate holdings and the sale of a 49 percent stake in the company.

The government plans to break up OSE, cutting 2,500 jobs, about 40 percent of its workforce. OSE workers nationally struck for 24 hours on Thursday in protest at the plans.

The violent attack by the riot police on the Acropolis staff, enforced by a government sponsored court order, is a stark indication that the ruling elite is stepping up its offensive against working people. Previous strikes and protests at the Acropolis and other archaeological sites have not met with the same response. Neither did the government do anything to prevent or remove two massive banners that were placed on the front of the Acropolis by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) in May. This was despite KKE members reportedly cutting through locks on the gates to gain entrance to the site at dawn.

Commenting on the action of the riot police, the *Financial Times* noted the “move on Thursday signalled that the socialist government is raising the stakes in its push to implement unpopular austerity measures, as previous strikes by guards at the site had been tolerated.”

Unemployment figures released this week show September’s official rate was 12 percent, up from 11.6 percent the previous month. 600,000 people are now unemployed in a country with a population of just 11.2 million people. This is set to rocket in the next weeks and months, amidst a deepening recession which will enter its third year in 2011. Next year’s rate has been forecast at 14.5 percent.

The workers employed by the Culture Ministry are members of the Civil Servants’ Confederation (ADEDY). The union issued a very mild press release following the events, stating, “We call on the

government to deal with the issue seriously and to consider the painful effects it has on employment”.

The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) has called a further one day general strike for December 15, to coincide with plans by the government to impose further austerity, ahead of its draft 2011 budget deficit. The strike will also mark one year since the first austerity measures were passed by PASOK. Like its counterpart, ADEDY, the GSEE has worked ceaselessly to enable the government to implement its attacks. Central to this was the agreement it signed in July with private sector employers that implemented a three-year pay deal. Under its terms, wages were frozen for 2010 and for the next two years. Wages will only rise in line with euro-zone inflation, which is currently about half the rate of Greek inflation.



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