

Greek union calls off rail strike

Robert Stevens
2 November 2010

On October 28, the Panhellenic Federation of Railway Workers (POS) called off the latest strike by Greek railway workers. The workers had already struck for three days from Monday to Wednesday last week and were due to continue strike action for a further day last Friday (October 29). This last strike was cancelled.

The action is the latest act of sabotage by the trade unions, which have worked throughout the past year to ensure that the ruling social democratic PASOK government has been able to implement its savage austerity plan.

POS called the strike in the first place in order to coincide with the discussion in parliament on the government's bill for the restructuring and eventual privatisation of the Hellenic Railways Organisation (OSE). On October 26, the bill was passed into law after its articles were sanctioned at the Parliamentary Plenum. Also included in the bill is selling off OSE real estate, cutting of unprofitable secondary routes, ending collective labour agreements and employees' wage scale.

This would leave the railway system in the hands of two companies—Trainose and Geose—that would own the rail infrastructure. The plan then calls for the sale of 49 percent of the rail services company TrainOSE to a private investor.

The government plans to slash the workforce of OSE from its current level of more than 6,000 to around 3,700. Transport Minister Dimitris Reppas said recently that cutting the wage bill was an essential component of the future sale of OSE. "We cannot accept that the revenues of the OSE are €106 million but wage costs are €116 million for 2009," he said.

The selloff of OSE/TrainOSE is central to PASOK's strategy of raising €3 billion by 2013 from privatising state companies. OSE is heavily indebted, with total liabilities of €10.7 billion. Its privatisation was part of the May agreement PASOK made with the International Monetary Fund and European Union in exchange for a €110 billion bailout package.

The sale of OSE's assets is already going ahead. The Chinese maritime freight group, Cosco China, which has control of two terminals in the port of Piraeus, is planning to build a transportation logistics centre at Thriassion, west of

Athens. The site is currently owned by OSER and will be sold before the end of the year. The Chinese government has been in close talks with the Greek government for some time and plans to establish Piraeus as its main transit centre for Chinese goods destined for the European market.

Calling off the strike, Nikolaos Kioutsoukis, the president of the union, said, "Rail workers fought in an honest, collective and dignified manner. We proved that above all we are fighting for a public, modern and competitive railway, which serves society's needs."

The union said it would now consider other options, including "exhausting all possible avenues in Greek and European courts and International Bodies in order to prevent the implementation of this law."

In reality the law has now been passed and the government is in advanced discussions with companies internationally regarding OSE's sale. On Wednesday last week the transport minister met his French counterpart Dominique Bussereau in Paris to discuss the possible sale of a 49 percent stake in Greek railways operating unit Trainose to French railway SNCF and Alstom Transport.

After the meeting Reppas stated, "What we want at this time is to implement the law on the basis of an operational plan that supports the law passed by the Greek parliament. We will do everything needed to streamline the Greek railway and make it functional. If along the way interest is expressed by credible countries, then indeed we could go on to an agreement."

Commenting on this wooing of private investors, Greek daily *Eleftherotytia* wrote, "In essence this is the latest attempt to convince the French that, further to the new law, the possibility of investing in the Greek railways is worth their while... The French appear interested in Athens' suburban railway and in a possible extension of the network from Mesogia towards Lavrio."

POS strikebreaking, at such a critical juncture, is a clear signal to the government of Prime Minister Georgis Papandreou that it has a green light to impose its privatisation plans. The railway unions have demonstrated that they defend the interests of big business and

international finance capital. POS's sabotage of workers in a key, highly strategic industry recalls that of the PSXEM truckers' federation, which called off a strike on the government's terms in August under conditions in which the country had ground to a halt, with fuel supplies dwindling.

The PSXEM truckers' federation played the critical role in ending the strike, after sections of the drivers had voted to continue it in defiance of the union. Following the issuing of an emergency "civil mobilisation order" by the government, truck drivers' union President Georgios Tzortzatos ended the action with the words, "We are now soldiers of the Greek state and we'll wait to see our orders."

Rail workers have participated in several strikes this year, including one in June where hundreds demonstrated outside the outside the infrastructure ministry in Athens. At that time Nikos Koutsoukis utilised the most demagogic phrasemongering and claimed, "We won't let them cancel any route. We are here to fight those who drink our blood and our sweat. We won't let them put the gravestone on (OSE's) grave they've dug with their own hands."

That is precisely what the trade union bureaucracy has done and within the space of four months.

On October 25 Papandreou warned ahead of the upcoming November 7 local elections that his government would continue to impose the necessary austerity measures demanded by the "troika"—the European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The prime minister said, "Greece is the most totalitarian state in Europe" due to "patronage jobs in a sick state system... permeated by clientism" that has led to "dependence on international lenders."

"Patronage" jobs are mainly those at management level in the public sector. However, the castigating of these layers is simply another means to denounce the so-called "privileges" and "perks" of workers throughout the public sector.

From January 1 the government plans to cut two-thirds of the remaining 1,000-plus municipalities, as well as dozens of district governments. This will be implemented alongside stringent controls on central-government funds transferred to local governments. At present central government grants €6 billion annually—about 8 percent of its total outlay to local governments. This equates to about 60 percent of local government total income. Interior Minister Giannis Raghkousis warned, "All the decentralized authorities, elected prefectures, municipalities and their local enterprises will not be able to spend one euro without prior approval".

A further 6,000 state-owned companies are to be cut down to 1,500, with the loss of thousands of jobs. This is being imposed under conditions of growing mass unemployment with more than 600,000 people (12 percent) of working

people out of work.

Endorsing the "weighty privatization programme", Nick Skrekas wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* September 30 that it is "designed to do more than boost recession-hit revenue target shortfalls. It can trigger a change in investor perceptions about Greece and kick-off further development of privatized sectors."

The role of the unions has been to facilitate this. POS is affiliated to the GSEE trade union federation that organises hundreds of thousands of workers. It has done nothing to oppose any of the government plans, only calling a series of token strikes to allow workers to let off steam while the government passes austerity bill after bill. In September GSEE President Yannis Panagopoulos said, "We have staged so many strikes, yet the tough policies, the ones prescribed by the (EU/IMF) memorandum have been implemented and there are no obvious alternative solutions."

The GSEE has called its latest token one-day action for December 15.

Millions of workers have demonstrated their opposition to the huge attacks being imposed by Papandreou, but every single conflict with the government to date has ended in defeat. The trade union bureaucracy plays the same demobilising role all over Europe. The defeat of the oil workers struggle in France last week demonstrates that workers, including those who have broad popular support and control a strategic sector of the economy, cannot win a victory through the existing organisations. In the struggles to come, workers must establish rank-and-file committees of action to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats. They must organise their struggles on an entirely different perspective, based on a political struggle to bring down the PASOK regime and the fight for a workers' government.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact