

Police attack protesters during Greek general strike

Ann Talbot

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Police brutally attacked demonstrators, who fought back, as an estimated 100,000 people took to the streets in a general strike that brought Greece's major cities to a standstill.

Public sector workers, including bank employees, court officials, teachers, doctors and other hospital workers, dentists, pharmacists, power workers, telecommunications workers, air traffic controllers and other airport staff, refinery workers, journalists at state and privately owned companies, ferry operators, and taxi drivers all joined the strike. Public transport workers who began their own strike yesterday provided some services on Wednesday morning to allow other strikers to join demonstrations.

Protesters shouted, "No sacrifice for the rich!" Their banners carried slogans such as, "The plutocracy should pay for the crisis."

Marchers were confronted by riot police as they entered Syntagma Square near the Parliament building in Athens. The police attacked them with batons and tear gas. Journalists and photographers were beaten to the ground, along with the demonstrators. Police motorcycle squads from the Delta Force charged into the crowds at full speed to split the demonstration into smaller, more vulnerable groups. The police attacked the crowd as they sought refuge at the headquarters of the Confederation of Greek Labour (GSEE), scattering them with tear gas and batons. Demonstrators later regrouped and returned to the Parliament building.

"This is unacceptable—it's worse than the junta. Is this the democracy we fought for? This is fascism," said Giorgos Papageorgiou, a 52-year-old factory worker who was gassed in the police assault.

Young protesters responded angrily. Some hurled Molotov cocktails and firecrackers at the heavily armoured police lines. When access to the Parliament

was barred, some vented their anger on the Finance building opposite. Three luxury cars were set on fire. A riot police bus was burned.

At one point a former transport minister, Kostis Hatzidakis, was attacked by a group of demonstrators shouting, "Thieves! Shame on you!" He was rescued by police officers and emerged from the melee with minor facial cuts and a bloody nose.

Police spokesman Thanassis Kokkalakis said that several arrests had been made in Athens and the northern city of Thessaloniki. As dusk fell, police helicopters were still circling over the capital and riot police continued to guard the Parliament building.

"The clashes are ongoing; it's not over yet," warned Kokkalakis.

The strike followed the introduction of further austerity measures on Tuesday. The ruling Greek social-democrat party, PASOK, rushed through the new legislation with just 10 hours of debate. It will allow the government to impose wage cuts in all companies in which it has a majority or minority holding. This will particularly affect public transport companies. Workers who earn more than 1,800 euros a month will face a 10 percent wage cut. Employees at enterprises such as the Agricultural Bank of Greece and other state-owned banks can expect the same treatment. The ports at Piraeus and Thessaloniki, water companies and power companies will all be hit.

Stamatis Klapsis, a stationmaster at a bus depot on the outskirts of Athens, explained what this meant for him and his colleagues: "In terms of our salaries, we are going back at least 20 years. They are taking us back to the Middle Ages."

The legislation allows the state to force workers in partly state-controlled companies to transfer to other enterprises, irrespective of their skills and experience.

Management will be able to ignore national pay agreements and impose their own terms.

A GSEE spokesman said that the new law was “appalling, unacceptable and places the weight of the crisis on the workers again, abolishing basic and fundamental rights.”

This outcry is a feint made in order to placate workers’ anger, but it is also made necessary because the legislation effectively removes the unions’ right to collective bargaining in state-controlled companies.

Prime Minister George Papandreou was meeting with the parliamentary opposition parties, who have all opposed the latest legislation, as the demonstration took place. Both the GSEE and the ADEDY, the public-sector federation, are attempting to mobilise parliamentary backing for their opposition to the legislation. But essentially their concern, and that of the more far-sighted politicians, is that the new laws will make it more difficult for the unions to control popular anger.

Alexis Tsipras, a leader of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) boycotted the talks with Papandreou. But his party regards the unions as the only legitimate source of political expression for the working class and has no fundamental differences with their leadership of the struggle against the austerity measures.

Yet this was the seventh general strike since the PASOK government came to power last October. Despite massive popular opposition, the government has been allowed to press on with its austerity programme because both major union federations have worked to prevent a political challenge to the government. They continue to direct workers’ anger at the International Monetary Fund and the European Union and the European Central Bank, whom they accuse of stealing Greece’s sovereignty. ADEDY said that the new legislation was enacted at the behest of the “IMF-EU-ECB troika.”

PAME, the smaller union federation affiliated to the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE), takes an equally nationalist line. It declared, “We strike because the EU, the International Monetary Fund, the government lead us to poverty, unemployment; they continuously load us with new burdens.”

PASOK MPs can readily agree with the unions on this issue. Complaining about the way in which his own

party had forced through the new legislation Panayiotis Kouroubilis said, “We have not signed over the rights to the country.”

To depict the Greek financial crisis as a question of national sovereignty—when workers across Europe are confronted with similar austerity measures—traps the protests in a blind alley that can only result in defeat. Without a break from the unions and politicians now portraying themselves as defenders of Greek sovereignty, the opposition to austerity will be sabotaged.

The only way Greek workers can defend themselves against the PASOK government is to unite with workers across Europe and internationally. One demonstrator, Ellada Christodoulou, told reporters, “Work rights are being suppressed and I think the whole Greek people should rise up. This is a fight not only in Greece but in the entire world.” She is entirely correct.



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