

# Which way forward for the working class in Greece?

Stefan Steinberg  
15 June 2011

Greece's main trade unions have called a one-day strike today against the latest social cuts demanded by the social democratic PASOK government. The strike poses pressing questions of political perspective to all class-conscious workers.

This strike, like the many previous one-day strikes called by union officials throughout Europe since the outbreak of the European debt crisis in 2009, will do nothing to halt the cuts demanded by the banks. This realization is spreading among ever-wider layers of the working class in Greece and throughout Europe, especially in the aftermath of the mass uprisings that led to the ouster of Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia.

The “indignant” demonstrations in Spain and the *Aganaktismeni* protests in Greece reflect the rejection of the entire political establishment by increasing sections of youth. At a mass demonstration in Athens on June 5, demonstrators turned against the trade union representatives, saying they had no right to take part.

There is a growing sense that the old forms of political life and working class struggle are outmoded. In Egypt, there is a deepening awareness that the ouster of Mubarak did not mean the end of the militarist regime. Nor has it fulfilled the political and social aspirations that drove the mass movement. The sense that something more radical and profound is required is reflected in the popular slogan for a “second revolution.”

In Spain, the dead-end of protest without a worked-out strategy and program embodying the independent interests of the working class is seen in the retreat of the *indignados* from Madrid's Plaza del Sol.

Both developments, in different ways, point to the need for the struggles of the working class to be guided by a new and fundamentally different perspective.

In Greece and internationally, it is necessary to carefully analyse the experiences of the past year and draw the appropriate political conclusions.

Just over a year ago, the Greek government presented the €110 billion loan from the European Union, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the starting point for a return to economic growth. The loans, however, carried high interest rates and were made conditional on enormous cuts in social spending that targeted the jobs, wages and social conditions of the working class.

The promises of growth notwithstanding, the imposition of these cuts drove the Greek economy into a free-fall. The rate of economic contraction went from 2.3 percent in 2009 to 4.0 percent in 2010—nearly twice as sharp a decline. The contraction has only accelerated this year, hitting minus 5.5 percent in the first quarter.

Greek economists estimate that workers have on average lost a staggering 30 percent of their income.

The economic collapse has made it impossible for Greece to repay its debts, despite the savage cost-cutting measures. Last Friday, the government of Prime Minister George Papandreou announced a new round of cuts and a massive sell-off of state property.

The experience in Greece, which is being replicated in Ireland, Portugal and other heavily indebted countries, underscores the reality that the bourgeoisie itself has no viable solution to the crisis, and that the slump is not merely a conjunctural downturn, but rather a systemic failure of world capitalism.

The subordination of Greece to the international financial elite in the form of the EU, the ECB and the IMF has led to a disaster for the working class. But the supposed alternative put forward by nationalists in Greece—withdrawal from the European common currency and a return to the drachma—would be equally catastrophic. The result would be massive inflation and the ruination of the population—a scenario like the hyperinflationary chaos that swept across Germany in 1923.

International finance capital is organising a historic transfer of social wealth into the hands of a tiny financial elite. For this ruling stratum, the forms of social protection developed in the West in the post-war period—unemployment provisions, pensions, health care, free education—represent an intolerable drain on profits. Now, all of these gains, won in the course of a century of bitter working class struggles, are to be swept away.

In their economic and social impact on the working class, the changes that the financial elite intends to carry out in Greece and internationally resemble the economic “shock therapy” introduced in the USSR at the end of the 1980s amid the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe.

These measures were the culmination of the counterrevolutionary policies of the Stalinist bureaucratic regime that usurped political power from the Soviet working class in the 1920s and 1930s and murdered hundreds of thousands of socialist-minded workers, intellectuals, artists, scientists and the entire generation of Bolsheviks, with Leon Trotsky at their head, who had led the Russian Revolution.

Working in alliance with Western imperialism, the bureaucracy under Gorbachev and then Yeltsin dismantled what remained of the nationalized industry established by the 1917 revolution and introduced capitalist market relations.

The result was a social catastrophe. Economic life rapidly disintegrated and massive swathes of state-owned property were sold off at rock-bottom prices, leading to the emergence of the Russian gangster oligarchy. There was a collapse in living standards and jobs and an unparalleled rise in social inequality. By the mid-1990s, Russian living standards had plummeted to such an extent that life expectancy fell below that of the Russian population during World War II.

The final act in the counterrevolutionary betrayal of the Stalinist bureaucracy was part of a broader process of degeneration and betrayal by all of the old labour bureaucracies—encompassing the social-democratic and Communist parties as well as the trade unions.

Now, with the outbreak of the economic crisis in Europe and North America, the union bureaucracies have worked systematically to contain, diffuse and strangle to resistance of the working class to the capitalist onslaught, defending the governments that are carrying out the attacks and seeking to limit popular opposition to impotent protests. While claiming they are “pressuring” national governments, they are in fact negotiating the

policies desired by the banks.

They have been given crucial assistance by the middle-class pseudo-left organizations—like SYRIZA in Greece, the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, the Anti-Capitalist Left in Spain, etc.—which devote all of their efforts to channelling working class opposition behind the trade unions and the bourgeois “left” parties.

Their occasional revolutionary rhetoric notwithstanding, these organizations oppose socialist revolution and the international unification of the working class. They support the cuts as a necessary step in boosting national competitiveness vis-à-vis the imperialist rivals of their national bourgeoisie and the emerging economies in Asia and Latin America.

There is no national solution to the crisis. The real dividing line in Europe and internationally is not between nationalities, but between classes.

Workers throughout Europe must reject media propaganda defaming Greeks as “lazy” and “living beyond their means.” As governments in Europe and worldwide push for similarly devastating attacks on the working class, the fundamental response must be the development of a common political struggle by the European and international working class.

Pressuring bourgeois governments, or transferring power from one faction to another of the ruling elite, offers no way forward for the working class.

The international bourgeoisie’s attack on workers’ social rights raises the question of political power. The only way to repel the banks’ offensive is the struggle by the working class to take power and overthrow capitalism. This requires the unification of the working class across Europe and internationally in a world struggle for socialism.

This is the program summed up in the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe and fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Stefan Steinberg



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**