

Tens of thousands strike in Greece as military threatens to intervene against anti-austerity protests

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Tens of thousands of workers, pensioners and youth protested throughout Greece Wednesday in a 24-hour public sector strike called by the ADEDY civil service trade union federation and the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE).

The strike is the first since the social democratic PASOK government announced further austerity measures, including thousands of public sector sackings and a 40 percent pay cut for 30,000 civil servants. Last month, parliament approved a property tax, added to utility bills, that will force 80 percent of households to pay between 1,000 euros and 1,500 euros extra a year. Failure to pay the tax will result in the shutoff of electricity.

Workers employed in public transport, local government, tax and insurance offices struck nationwide. State hospitals ran with emergency staff only and some state schools were forced to close. Also striking for the first time were air traffic controllers, leading to the cancellation of more than 400 international and domestic flights. Ferry services were also disrupted and major tourist sites were closed, although the Athens Metro ran normally.

Employees at a number of the state-run companies slated for privatisation joined the strike, including those at the electricity generation plant, the lottery and the port authorities of Piraeus and Thessaloniki.

Wednesday's strike followed the storming Friday of the Defence Ministry by hundreds of retired army officers calling for the overthrow of the PASOK government, the most dramatic of recent moves by sections of the military to intervene directly in the crisis.

In Athens, some 20,000 people marched on Wednesday to the main Syntagma Square outside parliament, holding placards declaring "Erase the Debt!" and "The Rich Must Pay," while in the northern city of Thessaloniki, the scene of major clashes between demonstrators and riot police in September, 10,000 protested.

A reported 1,000 police were deployed in the capital and

some demonstrators were attacked by riot police using batons and tear gas grenades. Police detained a number of people, with several injured.

A series of protests have been held in recent days that disrupted the work of officials and auditors of the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB)—known as the "troika." On Tuesday morning around 50 protesters took over the office of Labor Minister Giorgos Koutroumanis. Protesters have also staged a sit-in at the Finance Ministry.

The international monitors are in Athens not only to ensure that PASOK is adhering strictly to the austerity measures already agreed between the government and the troika, but to demand assurances of further brutal cuts. The troika insists that Greece can have access to the sixth instalment of the 110 billion euro loan agreed to by the EU, IMF and ECB last year—worth 8 billion euros—only if these conditions are met.

On Tuesday, Finance Minister Evangelos Venizelos said that Greece will run out of money by mid-November. The government also announced that it will not be able to meet its budget deficit target for 2011 of 7.5 percent of gross domestic product on time.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the head of the euro zone, has said that the decision on whether to loan Greece the additional funds, originally scheduled to be made on October 13, will now be made in mid-November. Juncker stated that the troika required additional time to complete its report on the Greek economy. In response to the decision, the Athens stock exchange plunged to an 18-year low amid fears that a default by Greece on its debts of around 330 billion euros is imminent.

PASOK and the troika are well aware that the austerity measures are only deepening the economic crisis facing the country. Latest figures show that Greece's economy will shrink 5.5 percent this year as a result of two successive years of austerity.

Nonetheless, they are unanimous in insisting that further savage cuts must be made as they utilise the economic crisis to push through a far-ranging assault on workers' jobs, living standards and democratic rights. This is combined with demands that the government agree to the rapid and wholesale privatisation of state assets, a policy that is being pushed by international banks and corporations eager to acquire valuable properties at fire-sale prices.

The various strikes and demonstrations organised by the trade unions are not aimed at mobilising the working class to bring down the government, but at containing and dissipating the widespread hostility to PASOK.

The leading figures of all the trade unions are long-time members and supporters of PASOK. Despite two years in which every austerity package has been succeeded by one even worse, they continue to peddle the lie that PASOK and the troika can be made to reverse their policies through limited strikes and protests. Referring to Wednesday's action, GSEE spokesman Stathis Anestis told Reuters, "With this strike, the government, the EU and the IMF will be forced to reconsider these disastrous policies."

In fact, yesterday's demonstrations were smaller compared to previous rallies held in the capital and elsewhere, signifying that workers and youth have become disillusioned with these token actions. There is a recognition that PASOK and its international backers are completely indifferent to popular sentiment—a fact underscored by the troika's latest insistence that collective labour agreements in the private sector be scrapped.

Whilst the trade unions and their apologists in the Stalinist and ex-left petty-bourgeois groups work to politically disarm the working class in the face of the offensive being carried out, the ruling elite understand very well that the assault on the social conditions of millions cannot be carried through by democratic means.

This is the significance of mounting threats from within the military to intervene against the government and crush the anti-austerity protests. Describing the events of last Friday, the *EUObserver* web site wrote: "Amid a wider protest of some 2,000 officers, around 300 stormed the [Defence Ministry] building as the crowd shouted 'down with the PASOK junta'—referring to the governing social democratic party."

The officers were requested to leave by the chief of the general staff. Later, Defence Minister Panos Beglitis complained, "Such bullying and anti-democratic behaviour that goes against the democratic government of the country is an insult that will be immediately repressed."

This only spurred the military to retaliation on Sunday. The Association of Support and Cooperation of the State Armed Forces, the military's professional association of full-

time staff, published an open letter to the government, signed by the president and general secretary of the armed forces association. It warned, "The executives of the Greek Armed Forces are monitoring with increased concern the latest developments regarding issues related to their needs after retirement."

The letter added that "the confidence of the uniformed personnel of the armed forces has been shaken regarding the intentions of the state to assist them... the threat of repressive violence is a serious blow to the morale of senior staff. This blow is extremely critical in the present geopolitical developments in our region."

The letter went on to warn ominously, "The military has every moral and legal basis to defend itself, and it will do so by any legal means."

The operation by the military at the Ministry of Defence and the open letter come just two weeks after Defence Minister Beglitis stated, "Recent days define the end of an epoch for Europe and for Greece. If we do not move immediately on orderly and conscious sacrifices, the road of internal conflict is open."

The intervention of the army into the political life of Greece—a country that was ruled by a military junta from 1967 to 1974—must serve as a warning to the working class. Brigadier Stylianos Pattakos, the last surviving officer of the junta, said last year, "In our time, there was no debt. Not one drachma went astray. The Greeks are not disciplined like the Germans or the British. They need authority."

For all Beglitis's complaint at the generals "anti-democratic behaviour," it is PASOK that is preparing the way for a direct intervention by the military. Last year, the government used the army to break a nationwide strike by truck drivers, using a law dating back to World War II. There is now further evidence that PASOK is actively considering its use more widely.

Noting that the government had previously insisted it "will not go so far as to deploy the army to maintain order," the *EUObserver* added, "However, on February 4 this year, according to the Athens News Agency, the Hellenic Army staged a mock battle with anti-austerity protesters."



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