

Growing strike wave in Greece

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Strikes and protests escalated throughout Greece this week as workers protested against the austerity programme of the social democratic PASOK government of Prime Minister George Papandreou.

The strikes are taking place ahead of a two-day general strike slated for this coming Wednesday and Thursday. The two-day walkout has been called by the private-sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public-sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY).

On October 11, dock workers staged a one-day national strike and agreed to hold 24-hour strikes on October 18 and 19.

Civil servants in Athens and around the country continued sit-in protests at town halls, ministries and public service offices. Workers sealed off the entrance to the social security informatics directorate, as well as the entrance to the housing, interior and development ministries and to the pensions directorate of the General State Accounts Office. Later in the day, local authority staff held a rally in central Athens and marched to the parliament building and interior ministry.

On October 12, members of the GENOP union began an occupation of the printing offices of the Public Power Corporation (PPC). As part of new property tax legislation, the PPC billing department is to send homeowners bills for increased property taxes as part of their electricity bills. This is intended to blackmail people into paying the new tax with the threat of having their electricity cut off. Protesters hung banners at the office reading, "We are not going to stop providing electricity to the poor people even if they put us in jail."

Shortly afterwards, GENOP attempted to end the protest, proposing instead to take action only if the PPC attempted to cut the electricity supply to people who refused to pay the tax.

Employees at museums and archaeological sites struck last Wednesday and Thursday.

On Thursday, a transport strike in Athens shut down the metro, the tram, city buses, trolley buses and the electric railway (ISAP). Taxi drivers were also on strike. A

demonstration by thousands of bus drivers and metro workers was held outside parliament to protest cuts in pay and the threat of job losses.

Civil servants in Athens continued their occupation of government ministries. Seven more were taken over, including the finance ministry.

Municipal workers nationwide occupied local government offices.

Since 2009, about 200,000 jobs have been lost in the civil service and local authorities.

A rally by doctors outside the health ministry was held as was a protest outside the finance ministry by patients suffering from kidney cancer.

Lawyers refused to appear in court, in sympathy with the strikes.

On Friday, transport workers in Athens remained on strike whilst customs officials began a ten-day strike. Taxi drivers held a 24-hour strike and a demonstration in Athens before marching to the parliament. This followed an announcement by the government Wednesday approving the deregulation of their industry and that of truck drivers.

Local authority refuse collectors continued a ten-day protest Friday that includes a blockade of the capital's main landfill site at Ano Liosia in northwest Athens. The strike has resulted in thousands of tonnes of refuse accumulating in Athens and the port city of Thessaloniki. The government warned that they will intervene to break the strike and bring in private contractors.

Next Monday, tax collectors will begin four days of actions, while seamen will strike for 48 hours beginning the same day. The seamen are demanding that their pension and social insurance fund, known as NAT, continue to receive financing from the state budget. They are also demanding a new collective labour agreement and a pay increase.

Bank workers are to hold a 48-hour strike from Tuesday.

Last Thursday, the government held a preliminary vote at the committee stage of an austerity bill that includes

further cuts in pay and pensions as well as further sackings in the public sector. Included in the legislation submitted to parliament this week by Finance Minister Evangelos Venizelos is Article 37, which seeks to end collective contracts for workers' pay and conditions in specific sectors of the economy. Venizelos said this had already been "totally agreed" this week in meetings with the "troika"—the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank—which is in charge of the European bailout fund for Greece.

The troika were in Athens to monitor the progress of the imposition of the austerity programme previously agreed with PASOK and to discuss yet more brutal attacks on the population. This is the precondition for Greece receiving the latest tranche of funds, €8 billion, from the €110 billion loan agreed to in May 2010. Without this, PASOK has confirmed that Greece will go bankrupt in mid-November.

Speaking to *Kathimerini* this week, Matthias Mors, the European Commission chief inspector for Greece, demanded that further attacks be imposed. "We are fully aware that this is very tough," he said.

The German and French governments are seeking to ensure that their own banking elites are protected in the event of a Greek default and will play a greater role in the imposition of even more devastating cuts in Greece. A briefing from the *Athens News Agency* Thursday noted that Venizelos said the "troika's role has been upgraded, and in addition to the EC, ECB and IMF, it now also represents German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy."

The troika have stated that they will authorise payment of the €8 billion at the end of October only if the Greek parliament adopts the austerity budget for 2012 that has already been approved by the Greek cabinet. The vote is scheduled for October 20.

The PASOK government is preparing a ruthless response to the challenge from the working class. On Friday, Venizelos denounced the ongoing strikes and protests as "blackmail." He said, "You can't occupy the general accounting office, the Social Security IT centre or the national printers. All this threatens democratic legitimacy and democracy must defend itself."

"This is a fight for our existence," he told parliament. "We will do anything."

The trade unions, led by GSEE and ADEDY, are equally desperate to head off the rising tide of opposition. Since PASOK's election in October 2009, the unions have held sporadic one-day strikes as the means of

dissipating social anger. While occasionally denouncing PASOK's agenda the union leaders, themselves all members of the governing party, have ensured that each and every cuts package has gone through.

It was only in response to the mounting social anger that the union federations agreed this week to extend next week's strike to 48 hours. But at the same time, they have suspended the Hellenic Petroleum (ELPE) workers' strike, which posed a grave threat to the government.

On October 11, the refinery workers struck in defence of their collective bargaining rights. The refinery workers have the power to bring the economy to a standstill within days. But within hours, the petroleum workers union moved to call off the action on the basis of a worthless promise from the government that the workers would retain collective bargaining rights.

Each betrayal by the unions, each occasion where they come to the rescue of PASOK, undermines their own standing. Fearful of the consequences, the representatives of the rail trade union faction, PASK, sent a letter to the prime minister announcing that they were resigning from both PASK and the PASOK party. They wrote, "The policy of the PASOK government is leading the overwhelming majority of the population to pauperization."

In a revealing comment, summing up the filthy role the entire trade union bureaucracy have played over the last two years, the letter noted that they had remained in PASOK even though rail workers "lost almost 40 percent of our salaries" and despite a law being "implemented that did away with 40 percent of staff."

The letter continued: "Despite all these things, we 'rolled up our sleeves' together with all workers so that the railway could run, conscious that our survival was tied up with its operation."



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