

Greek refuse workers threatened with army intervention on eve of general strike

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Greece's social democratic PASOK government is preparing to use the army against striking Athens refuse workers and threatening mass arrests. The attack on the refuse workers is a pre-emptive move against the entire Greek working class ahead of today's 48-hour general strike.

Late on Friday, the government of Prime Minister George Papandreou stepped up its efforts to break the refuse strike by commissioning private vehicles to begin collecting thousands of tons of trash in the capital. Workers seeking to block the scab operation were threatened with three-month prison sentences and fines.

On Sunday evening, riot police engaged in pitched battles with workers who had been occupying Athens's main landfill site northwest of the city since the beginning of the dispute. Having violently taken over the site, riot police were guarding the area on Monday.

According to a report in the Greek daily *Kathimerini*, some of the private trucks were attacked by angry workers. In the same article—headlined “Army to Break Trash Standoff?”—*Kathimerini* reported, “By the early afternoon, media reports said that the Defence Ministry had been asked to intervene in the dispute. According to sources, 170 professional soldiers are to be assigned to drive municipal garbage trucks.”

Yesterday, the government upped the ante, ordering strikers back to work and signing a civil mobilization order for the whole of Athens. Failure to comply could mean arrest and trial, according to the Interior Ministry.

In recent weeks strikes have escalated to involve virtually every section of the working class, including civil servants, transport workers, dock workers, teachers, health care workers, journalists, banking staff, lawyers, court officials and customs officials.

The walkouts are now so widespread that they threaten the government's ability to operate on a day-to-day basis. Government ministries have been occupied in Athens, with many municipal offices also occupied nationwide. This week, Finance Ministry employees who face savage pay cuts and the likelihood of redundancy, including tax collectors, voted to hold a five-day strike.

The two-day general strike coincides with a vote in parliament Thursday on the latest austerity measures agreed to

by PASOK with the “troika” overseeing the rescue funds for Greece—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Union (EU) and the European Central Bank (ECB). The measures include thousands of public sector workers losing their jobs and 30,000 more having their wages slashed by 40 percent. Pensions are being cut even further and measures are being enacted destroying collective bargaining rights. A further levy on taxpayers is being introduced on top of the recently passed property tax. It is estimated that the levy will cost Greek home-owning households (80 percent of the population) between 500 and 1,500 euros a year.

The troika has made the imposition of these cuts a precondition for handing over the latest tranche, 8 billion euros, of the bailout loans agreed in May of 2010.

Such an assault on the social conditions of an entire population is unprecedented in the post-World War II period. Research published by the *Financial Times* Tuesday revealed that “planned tax increases and spending cuts for 2011 are equivalent to about 14 percent of average Greek take-home income—or €5,600 (\$7,707) for every household.”

The newspaper commented, “The degree of financial pain confronting the Greek population is twice as severe as that in Ireland and Portugal, fuelling concerns that the drastic austerity programme imposed by lenders could smother growth in the euro zone's weakest economy.”

The *Financial Times* added that the impact on the social conditions of the population was “nearly three times that of Spain.”

Despite the daily mantra from the Greek government and the troika over the past two years that the imposition of massive cuts in living standards was the only way to resolve Greece's sovereign debt crisis, the debt level has worsened. It is widely accepted that Greece will soon default on debts totalling around 330 billion euros.

The Greek economy has been in recession for nearly three years, experiencing continuous negative growth since at least the end of 2008. *Kathimerini* recently commented: “It will be the same story for the second half. This means Greece has experienced at least 11 quarters of consecutive negative growth. To put this in perspective, the Great Depression produced 12 quarters of negative growth. For anyone who doesn't

remember, that was between 1929 and 1932.”

As a result of PASOK’s agenda, in just two years more than 200,000 public sector workers have lost their jobs and unemployment has continued to skyrocket. New unemployment figures this week from the Organisation for the Employment of Human Resources reported a jump of more than 18 percent since September last year, from 665,059 to 774,059. The number without a job for more than 12 months increased 36 percent since last year. Of the unemployed, 60 percent are in the 30 to 54 age group, while around 28 percent of the unemployed are under 30.

The economy is forecast to shrink by 5.5 percent this year and a further 2.5 percent in 2012, bringing the total contraction since 2008 to 14 percent.

In June, the Greek parliament announced an austerity programme of 28 billion euros to be imposed from 2012 to 2015. Since then it has announced a further 10.3 billion in cuts. On top of that, the government is committed to raising another 50 billion euros in privatisations, necessitating further drastic inroads on the jobs, pay and conditions of the working class.

Such is the level of popular opposition that the *Financial Times* felt it necessary to warn: “There are significant doubts over whether Greece will manage to implement its full €24.6 billion austerity package, of which €10.3 billion in additional measures has been announced since the first publication of the budget to make up for slippage elsewhere.”

The scale of attacks on Greece’s small population of 11 million is revealed by the *Financial Times*’ research, which finds that “even if the government managed to implement just half of those additional measures, the impact on public spending and taxation would be equivalent to about 11 percent of average household income—€4,500—of which about €2,300 would be in the form of newly imposed taxes and levies.

“That would still leave Greece with a package more painful than Ireland’s in 2009—the height of that country’s austerity regime—which was worth €4,800 for each household, or 9 percent of household income. This year Ireland’s austerity programme is equivalent to 7 percent of household income.”

Even this onslaught on the population barely scratches the surface in terms of what the ruling elite are prepared to carry out. The newspaper warned: “As Greece’s debt interest payments are projected to increase by 77 percent between 2010 and 2015, it needs to make deep cuts to public spending just to stand still, with further measures needed beyond those if the deficit is to be reduced.”

Serving international finance capital and the Greek super-rich, who have salted away more than 600 billion euros in Swiss bank accounts, PASOK has vowed to stop at nothing in implementing a social counterrevolution. On Sunday, three top government members—Education Minister Anna Diamantopoulou, Health Minister Andreas Loverdos and Transport Minister Yiannis Ragousis—wrote an article stating that the pauperisation of the population was not proceeding

nearly rapidly enough. “Now is the time to press the accelerator, not apply the brakes. We cannot retreat, we don’t have the right to retreat,” they wrote.

As the moves against the refuse workers demonstrate, the government is well aware that this declaration of war against the working class cannot be carried out without mass opposition and requires state repression. PASOK used the army to break a nationwide strike by truck drivers last year. It was revealed earlier this month by the *Athens News Agency* that on February 4 the Hellenic Army staged a mock battle with anti-austerity protesters.

PASOK’s actions are encouraging and preparing the way for a direct intervention by the military. Earlier this month, several thousand army officers protested outside the Defence Ministry offices while several hundred more stormed the building, remaining there for several hours.

Two years of mass austerity have produced a collapse in support for PASOK from its traditional working class voters. The latest polls show that it now has the support of only 15 percent of the population. This is lowest level of support for the social democratic party since it was established in 1974 following the downfall of the fascist military regime that year.

That such a hated government is able to remain in power is entirely due to the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracy in the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants’ Confederation (ADEDY). These organisations supported the election of PASOK, claiming it to be a progressive alternative to the despised New Democracy government. They are controlled by bureaucrats who for years have profited from their close relationship with PASOK, in the form of privileges, sinecures and fat salaries.

Since PASOK’s election in October 2008, the main concern of the unions has been to strangle every manifestation of working class opposition. Whether by rushing to call off workers’ strikes, such as that by the oil refinery workers last week, or calling the occasional 24-hour strike to let off steam, the unions function as the government’s partners in austerity in opposition to the interests of the working class.



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