

Massive protests on first day of Greek general strike

Robert Stevens, Christoph Dreier
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Greece was hit on Wednesday, the first day of a 48-hour general strike, with the biggest protests since the fall of the military regime in 1974. Hundreds of thousands of workers and youth protested nationwide against the austerity programme being imposed by the social democratic PASOK government.

Greece was brought to a standstill as a result of overwhelming popular support for the strike called by the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and public sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY). The two-day action follows a week of escalating industrial action.

One Greek newspaper wrote of the “Mother of all Strikes.” BBC journalist Gavin Hewitt commented, “I have never seen here in Athens such crowds in the streets. The electricity workers were still trying to reach Parliament Square—four hours after the protests started.”

Across the country, central and local government offices closed, as well as schools and courts. Hospitals operated with skeleton staffs on an emergency-only basis. Civil servants continued sit-ins at government ministries and state agencies. Pharmacists and dentists joined the walkout.

The national transport system was paralysed and Athens' Metro system ran only to get striking workers to the main demonstration. The national rail service ground to a halt and ferry operations were suspended by a dock workers' strike. Some 150 flights were cancelled as air traffic controllers struck for 12 hours.

Journalists walked out, stopping production of national newspapers. Taxi drivers, who have been involved in protests for months against plans to deregulate their industry, also struck.

Employees at private businesses including bakeries, shops and offices also joined the strike, resulting in the closure of

many small businesses. Previous strikes over the past two years have in the main involved workers in the public sector. But more than 250,000 workers have lost their jobs in the private sector as the result of a recession that is now in its fourth year. This more than matches the figure in the public sector, where more than 200,000 jobs have been eliminated by the PASOK government of Prime Minister George Papandreou in the last two years.

In the capital, Athens, an estimated 200,000 marched from Pedion tou Areo Square to the parliament building in Syntagma Square. Once outside parliament, thousands gathered to chant slogans denouncing the government.

Large protest rallies were also held in the second largest city, Thessaloniki, and in Patra, Volos and the island of Crete.

This week, the government began using the military in an attempt to break an ongoing strike by refuse workers. The two-week stoppage has led to the piling up of thousands of tonnes of rubbish in the streets of Athens and other major urban centres.

The government organised a massive state operation against the protest in Athens. It mobilised 7,000 riot police and set up a cordon of police buses and a steel fence in front of parliament. Two Metro train stations were closed in the area around the parliament.

The police attacked protesters in streets away from the main demonstration and in Syntagma Square itself. At least seven people were hospitalized, with some suffering from breathing problems as a result of tear gas attacks.

Workers, youth, students and pensioners marched in Athens. The mood was militant and angry. In addition to official trade union delegations that carried their own banners, many brought hand-made placards.

Those in attendance spoke of their opposition to the intolerable conditions being imposed on the working class and said they would step up their resistance. A 50-year public sector worker, Akis Papadopoulos, said of the

government's programme, "Who are they trying to fool? They won't save us. With these measures the poor become poorer and the rich richer. Well I say: 'No, thank you. I don't want your rescue.'"

The strike coincides with votes in parliament on a new austerity bill that will deepen the onslaught on an already pauperised population. Last night parliament voted in principle to adopt the bill, which passed with all 154 PASOK legislators voting in favour. There were 141 votes against and five absentees.

The bill will become law after a second vote today on the separate articles of the legislation. They authorise further reductions in the pay of 700,000 public sector employees, cuts in pensions, tax increases, a suspension of pay accords in various sectors and an end to the constitutional law barring the layoff of civil servants.

Some 30,000 public sector workers will be suspended from employment and have their pay cut by 40 percent. After a year they face the sack. Those receiving pensions above 1,000 euros will have the amount reduced by 20 percent. The lump sum received by employees on their retirement is also to be cut.

The powerful rejection by the working class of the government's agenda stands in sharp contrast to the programme of the Greek trade unions. Over the last two years, the GSEE and ADEDY have worked to contain working class opposition in order to allow the passage of one austerity bill after another.

The unions have very close ties to PASOK and their bureaucracies are made up of the same privileged social layers as the ruling party. Working as partners in austerity, they have organized 24-hour strikes every few months only to allow workers to let off steam. When any movement of workers has seriously imperiled the Greek economy, as did the action of the refinery workers last week, the unions have immediately moved to strangle it.

Confronted by a rising tide of bitter strikes in recent weeks and fearing that the pent-up anger and frustration in the working class could erupt out of its control, the union bureaucracy decided to extend this week's strike from 24 to 48 hours. Ilias Iliopoulos, secretary general of ADEDY, warned, "Things have reached a very difficult point and there is a sense of rage among the public."

The unions are again seeking to confine workers to nationalist appeals to PASOK. Nikos Kioutsoukis of the GSSE said of the parliamentary deputies, "If they have any humanity, decency, sense of pride and Greek soul left, they must reject the bill."

"The people are not on this demonstration because of the trade unions," Nick, a 50-year-old economics teacher from Athens told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The trade unions,

the GSEE and ADEDY, don't represent the majority. Just a few people went with them in recent weeks."

Vangelis, 22, a student, agreed: "The trade unions work just for themselves, not for the workers."

Several workers rejected the nationalist rhetoric of the unions. Ioanna, a 27-year-old worker, said, "This fight is international. The European elite is using Greece as an experiment to see how far they can go with the attacks on the population."

Irene, a tax official from Athens, said, "We have to fight together with the German workers for a global redistribution of wealth. If the German workers fight for better wages, we have a chance to do it as well."

The mass demonstrations in Greece are a powerful expression of the growth of the class struggle internationally. They follow the Occupy day of action on Saturday, in which hundreds of thousands of people protested in Europe, the US and internationally against the imposition of mass austerity and the bailout of the financial elite.

Demonstrations of hundreds of thousands were held in Rome and Madrid. These protests took place in the wake of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia at the beginning of the year and the recent protests by tens of thousands of young people in the "Indignados" movement.

To stop the destruction of their livelihoods, workers and youth must recognize that they are in a fight against the capitalist system. The breakdown of the system on a world scale is being used by the ruling elite of every country to carry out a social counter revolution, the aim of which is the destruction of all of the past gains of the working class and the imposition of mass poverty.

This means workers in Greece and in every other country must consciously wage a political struggle against the ruling class and all of its parties, social democratic and "left" as well as conservative, to establish a workers' government and place the corporations and banks under the democratic control of the working people. This requires a break with the official trade unions and the unification of the working class of all countries in an international struggle for socialism.



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