

The way forward in Greece

Christoph Dreier
25 October 2011

The huge general strike that paralysed Greece last week was a powerful expression of the strength of the working class with international significance. The protests involved hundreds of thousands of workers demonstrating their opposition to the austerity policies of the government and were the largest since the downfall of the military dictatorship in 1974.

The protests in Greece earlier this summer were largely dominated by petty-bourgeois forces, but last Wednesday and Thursday it was above all workers who converged on Syntagma Square in Athens and marched in many other Greek cities. The movement of the “outraged” that had restricted itself to democratic demands on the government was no longer to be seen.

The hostile mood of participants was directed not only against the government and all of the parties represented in parliament, but also against the two major union federations, the GSEE and ADEDY. “The workers are not taking to the streets because of the unions but in spite of the unions,” one worker said, summing up the prevailing sentiment.

Those taking part also had few illusions in such pseudo-left parties such as SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) and Antarsya (Anti-Capitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow). Instead, there was a widespread acknowledgment that demands on the government would be just as ineffective as any attempt to change the composition of the government coalition. What motivated workers was the irreconcilable conflict between the entire political establishment and the mass of the population.

In the past two years the social democratic PASOK government of George Papandreou has implemented unprecedented social cutbacks demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union. Wages have been cut for public service workers by up to 50 percent and taxes raised for the ordinary population. The ensuing recession has led to massive layoffs in the private sector.

At the same time private wealth in Greece remains untouched. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel*

reported that Greek millionaires have deposited 600 billion euros in Switzerland alone. This sum is more than twice the total of Greek government debt—invoked to justify the massive cuts in recent years.

Last Thursday, the Greek parliament decided upon further austerity measures, including additional wage and pension cuts, more job cuts in public services and the deregulation of the country’s national contract law. Millions of Greek workers are being driven into destitution. Despite this, just three days later, EU officials announced that the cuts made thus far are insufficient and the government had to intensify its austerity measures over the next two years.

Many workers at the demonstrations were aware in two respects of the international implications of the developments in Greece: they understood that in the struggle for their rights they face the combined might of the major European institutions, and that Greece is a test case for the imposition of similar cuts in all European countries.

A social worker described the multibillion-dollar bailouts of the EU as an attempt to impose “Greek conditions” all over Europe. “The money is stolen from European workers and given to the Greek government which, in turn, passes it on directly to the big banks.”

His comment summed up the overwhelming sentiment in Athens: the irreconcilable opposition between the interests of the European working class on the one hand and those of the ruling elites and their institutions on the other.

This is the reason for the brutal response by the government to the protests. It used some skirmishes between anarchists and members of the Stalinist union PAME to clear Syntagma Square with the massive use of tear gas and stun grenades. Police chased the protesters hundreds of meters through the streets and the entire city centre was drenched in tear gas. A few days earlier, striking street sanitation workers were put under military law by the government in order to force them back to work.

The brutality in Athens is only the beginning of a growing confrontation between the government and the population. Given the irreconcilable conflict of interests, the alternative is increasingly posed: either workers overthrow the government to expropriate the banks and establish a workers' government, or the government will brutally suppress working class resistance and continue its vicious austerity measures.

In this situation the trade unions are doing all they can to sabotage a movement of workers against the government. In recent weeks they have organized numerous isolated and ineffective strikes, which only serve to demoralize workers. Should strikes (like that of refinery workers) prove effective, they are quickly called off with no results. When sanitation workers took to the streets last week they were forced back to work, with the unions refusing to lift a finger in their defence.

The behaviour of the Stalinist PAME trade union was particularly significant. PAME has sought to pose as somewhat more left than GSEE and ADEDY, but in recent weeks has refrained from organising a single strike. On Thursday, supporters of PAME, who are close to the Greek Communist Party (KKE), assumed responsibility for defending parliament from demonstrators with their own security guards. Wearing helmets and armed with baseball bats, PAME supporters directly took over the role of the police in Athens to beat up and intimidate demonstrators.

The unions represent a social layer that has nothing in common with the working class. According to research by the daily *To Vima*, a trade union boss in Greece pockets €250,000 a year. The unions have close connections with the Greek government and especially the ruling PASOK.

The unions in turn are supported by numerous pseudo-left organizations that have joined together in the two alliances, Syriza and Antarsya. The Socialist Workers Party of Greece (member of the International Socialist Tendency-IS) recently founded a "committee of trade unionists and trade unions" to mobilise support for the unions at a time when workers are turning away from them en masse. The Xekinima group (member of the Committee for a Workers' International-CWI) has gone so far as to defend PAME's campaign to protect the Greek parliament.

The reactionary character of these organizations is especially evident in their utterly nationalist orientation. A leading representative of the GSEE union, Nikos Kioutsoukis, spoke out against the cuts introduced by the government by arguing that it contradicted "the decency,

pride" of the "Greek spirit."

While there is little to distinguish between the position of Syriza and that of the ruling PASOK party (both support additional cuts as a means to obtain further financing from the EU), representatives of Antarsya and Xekinima speak out in favour of quitting the euro, reintroducing the drachma and refusing to repay the debt. A representative of the Communist Party (KKE) told the WWSW that the source of all the problems in Greece lay with the European Treaty of Maastricht, which came into force 22 years ago.

The measures proposed by these groups would have devastating consequences not only for Greek workers but also for the entire European working class. Such proposals are primarily aimed at chaining workers to the Greek state and subordinating them to the interests of the ruling elite. A Greek bankruptcy and a return to the drachma would decouple the country from the global economy and trigger an even deeper recession combined with soaring inflation. The purchasing power of wages would plummet overnight.

The developments in Greece in recent years demonstrate that there is no national solution for workers. Not only do Greek workers face the same enemy in the form of the EU institutions as all other European workers, such measures as the expropriation of the banks and their control by the broad masses of the population are only possible at an international level.

To defend their rights, workers not only have to combat the Greek PASOK government but undertake a systematic campaign to establish the United Socialist States of Europe. The international significance of their struggle, which many workers feel instinctively, must be made the basis of a conscious political program.

This requires a political break with the trade unions and their pseudo-leftist supporters and the building of sections in every European country of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the only political tendency that bases itself on the historical legacy of Marxism and the strategic lessons drawn from the experiences of the 20th century.

Christoph Dreier



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact