# Mass layoffs in Greece’s public sector

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On Monday, the new Greek government, recently installed by the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), began implementing the austerity measures demanded by the EU and the IMF. In a first step, up to 16,000 public sector workers were forced into early retirement on 60 percent of their salaries, which have already been cut 30 to 50 percent.

By the end of 2011, thousands of younger workers in public or partially state-owned enterprises will follow them. According to trade union figures, up to 50,000 workers could be affected by these cuts overall.

These dismissals signal a general attack on the working class in Greece. The public sector was once a standard for the whole economy; these are the first mass layoffs in Greece’s public sector since 1911. The different retirement arrangements are a transparent attempt by the government to avoid legal action against it. The Greek constitution prohibits dismissals in the public sector.

Cutting the public sector work force was one of the main demands of the EU and IMF to approve the last €8 billion tranche of the bailout fund that was adopted last year and that is necessary for Greece to avoid an immediate bankruptcy in mid-December.

After the execution of the layoffs on Monday, the EU finance ministers approved the funds on Tuesday. The payout of the loans had been delayed over several months because the EU and IMF were not satisfied by the far-reaching austerity measures adopted by the Greek government at that time.

The mass layoffs show that not a single cent of the bailouts will benefit the workers. These funds will be used to pay off Greece’s creditors among the major banks, which haverecently received astronomic interest rates on their loans. The workers, on the other hand, will face further brutal attacks.

Government officials just announced extensive privatisations for the beginning of next year. The gas company DEPA and 35 state buildings are already slated for sale in the first quarter of 2012. By 2015, the government wants to sell public property valued overall at €50 billion. This wave of privatisation will undoubtedly lead to even more unemployment.

Previous privatisations, wage and pension cuts of up to 50 percent, and tax increases have already led to a deep recession. After a 4.5 percent economic decline last year, the OECD estimates negative growth for this year of minus 6.1 percent and minus 3.0 percent for 2012. The official unemployment rate stands at about 20 percent.

The present cuts have already caused deep misery on the streets of Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities across Greece. According to the Associated Press, about 20,000 people have lost their homes since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. According to the social work organisation Klimaka, a substantial part of the new homeless population is well-educated and belongs to middle-class layers.

Under these conditions, it is widely expected that further attacks on the living conditions of the working class will lead to a social explosion. Already at the end of October, Greece saw the largest strikes and demonstrations since the collapse of the fascistic junta in 1974.

The response of the EU and IMF was to force the social democratic prime minister, George Papandreou, to resign and make way for a government of national unity. Headed by the social democratic former vice-president of the European Central Bank (ECB), Lucas Papademos, and backed by the fascistic LAOS party, the new government was installed to implement austerity measures in the face of massive popular opposition.

The incoming prime minister and the leaders of the three governmental parties—the social democratic PASOK party, the conservative New Democrats (ND) and the neo-fascist LAOS—signed a letter to the EU and IMF promising to implement austerity measures and cut down the public staff.

Less than three weeks after it was sworn in, the government is now moving ahead over mass opposition. Transport workers already announced strikes last week, and newspaper and television journalists stopped work for a day.

For today, strikes in both the public and the private sector are planned. The refuse workers, who were on strike for several weeks this year, will again stop work. Several demonstrations are to be held at noon.

Given the enormous anger of the workers and the scale of the attacks, these protests could again become the focal point of popular opposition.

The new government has given every indication that its response to sustained working class opposition would be violent repression. On November 17, the police attacked the first demonstration against the new government with police clubs and tear gas. In January, soldiers received training sessions on riot control. The government could seek to supress the protests and establish even more authoritarian forms of rule.

In this explosive situation, it becomes decisive for the working class to organise struggles that are politically independent from the state and its allies, and based on a socialist programme. That entails a break with the trade unions and their defenders in the so-called "left" groupings.

The unions have played a critical role in implementing the austerity measures of the last three years. They are strongly bound up with PASOK, which still plays the dominant role in the government, and are an integral part of the state.

The unions feel constrained to organise the general strike today to let off steam, but they try to limit it as much as possible. This is not even properly speaking a general strike, as large sections of the working class are not called upon to strike, and union officials have already announced that workers will go back to work on Friday. In the event of a serious confrontation of the workers with the state, the trade unions will defend the latter.