

## On-the-spot report

# Athens steel strike enters fifth month

Our reporters  
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Fifteen of the steel workers on strike at the Hellenic Steel plant surrounded a brazier on a cold spring day in Halyvourgia, an industrial zone on the outskirts of Athens. Directly across the road is the large Hulis cement factory, which is now operating only one day a week.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spent the day with the strikers.

This month the workers entered the fifth month of their bitter strike. Hellenic Steel is owned by John Manessis and is one of three firms that control steel production in Greece. The strike began on October 31, when workers at the plant, employing 400, rejected plans to cut the work day from eight to five hours and slash wages by 40 percent.

Dimitrios, employed on the shop floor for 17 years, said he earns only 1,100 euros a month. A newly hired worker earns “just 650 euros per month, but with the new minimum wage it was reduced to 550 euros.” He added, “We have no weapon other than to strike.”

After its plans were opposed, the firm began unilaterally to sack workers. Hellenic Steel was the first major employer to utilize new legislation allowing firms to dismiss five percent of its staff every month, instead of the previous limit of two percent. Since the strike began, the company has sacked 93 workers and plans to dismiss a total of 180.

Of all the strikes in Greece since the imposition of sweeping austerity measures by the social democratic PASOK government in October 2009, the steel workers’ struggle is the longest. But despite a militant fight by the workers to defend their jobs and livelihoods, the Metal Workers Federation (POEM) has from the outset sought to isolate and sabotage the struggle. POEM is affiliated

with the main private-sector trade union, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE).

POEM worked to prevent the unity of the workers at the Halyvourgia plant with those at the company’s two other plants, in the city of Volos. There, POEM accepted the same conditions of lower pay and reduced work hours being demanded at the Halyvourgia plant. The treachery of the GSEE/POEM in Volos was aided by the pseudo-left SYRIZA coalition, which insisted that the workers not organize a joint strike with their co-workers in Volos.

Panagiotis, a striker who has worked at the factory for 31 years, said that workers were generally very hostile to the GSEE and that he wasn’t surprised by what the union had done. “The actions of the official trade unions are a fake,” he told the WSW. “They never appeared at the plant. The limited actions like the general strikes they call are just to give the illusion they are doing something. We need many more strikes to win. One bird does not mean the summer.”

A rival union, the General Steel Workers Union, is affiliated to the All Militant Workers Front (PAME), the trade union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE). PAME has sought to utilize the blatant betrayal of the GSEE to promote itself as a militant alternative. By denouncing the Metal Workers Federation for not lifting a finger in defence of the strikers, PAME has been able to win influence among the workers at Halyvourgia.

A resolution passed by the general assembly of the steel workers of Helliniki Halivourgia on November 16 endorses PAME’s role, stating, “PAME stands on our side.” The resolution attacks the Metal Workers Federation, which “did not call a single meeting to organize a solidarity campaign.”

The resolution calls for support for the “steel workers in all ways possible: resolutions, announcements, press

releases from trade unions, the presence of neighborhood groups, youth and women's organizations outside the factory gate, financial aid and collections of food for the strikers' families."

But PAME has not organized any serious broadening of the strike, even though it claims more than 400,000 members. It supported a selective four-hour regional strike in solidarity with the steel workers on November 27. Further support strikes backed by PAME were held on December 12 and January 17.

Regarding the latter strike a PAME statement read: "The task of preparing and carrying out the solidarity strike on January 17 has been shouldered largely by the members of PAME." However, the strike was not an independent action called by PAME, but part of the most recent token general strikes organized by the increasingly discredited GSEE and ADEDY (public-sector) labor federations.

The attack on the workers at Halyvourgia Hellenic Steel are indicative of the assault on wages and jobs throughout the private sector in Greece. In the year up to October 2011, more than 250,000 private-sector jobs were lost as the country entered its fifth year of recession. One striker said that at the cement factory across the road, where work hours had been reduced from five days to just one day a week, the workers who remained were taking home just 200 euros a month.

There was a general understanding among workers at the Halyvourgia plant that they were involved in a struggle that goes beyond the attacks on pay and conditions at just their factory. While the trade unions, including PAME, seek to limit the struggles of workers, those strikers who spoke to the WSWS raised that the issues facing the working class in Greece required a political solution.

Panagiotis has a 28-year-old daughter and a 29-year-old son. Both want to leave Athens to find a job. "There are no jobs left in Greece," he said. "The future of my children is the most important thing for me."

"My wife earns just 580 euros a month. She is working in a kindergarten," he added. "I can't believe the social conditions here. Some of my neighbours regularly go around with a basket asking other people for food."

So drastic is the deterioration in living standards that Panagiotis said, "The situation is much worse than under the dictatorship."

Asked what he thought was going to happen in Greece, he replied, "The politics of recent years will lead to a social explosion. And compared to this explosion, the

events in Egypt will be seen as a tea party."

Janis has worked at the plant for nine years. She said that before the introduction of the last budget, in which parliament imposed the most brutal attacks yet on behalf of the "troika" (International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank), "A lot of workers could live OK in Greece from their wages. They could have a family. But that has come to an end.

"The differences between the rich and the poor have become bigger and bigger. For everybody, life is becoming harder and harder, but the rich are eating with a golden spoon. You can now see that in everyday life. You can see people looking into the garbage every day for food."

Despite the militant rhetoric of PAME and the KKE, they function essentially as a pseudo-left shield for the official trade unions' collaboration with governments that have imposed a social counterrevolution on the Greek population over the last three years.

The working class must fight on the basis of a new perspective, based on the unification of workers in every sector, aimed at bringing down the government and forming a workers' government to implement socialist policies. Committees of action, independent of all wings of the trade union bureaucracy, must be formed in every workplace and community.

Workers in Greece must see their struggles against austerity and pauperization as part of the battle against the social onslaught being carried out against workers throughout Europe and seek to win the support of all workers on the continent who face a common struggle.

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