

Athens court declares two strikes illegal

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In the last week, two strikes have been declared illegal in Greece, including the long-running steelworkers strike at the Hellenic Steel Company.

Last Sunday, an Athens court ruled that a strike by tour bus drivers, due to take place the following day, was illegal. The drivers were set to strike in opposition to brutal cuts in their pay and benefits demanded by their employers in negotiations over a new collective agreement.

Talks between the bus owners and trade union officials have been ongoing since February. Management have called for pay and benefits to be cut by 50 percent. This is on top of cuts of 20 percent that have already been implemented.

In addition, workers have had no pay increase since 2009. Since then, many drivers have been made redundant. Among the employment rights of the drivers that the company insists be torn up are the minimum wage and the current number of free days.

On Tuesday, an Athens court ruled that the eight-month strike by the workers of the Hellenic Steel Company in Aspropyrgos was illegal. The court began hearing the case on May 29. In its ruling it claimed that no proper vote for strike action had taken place. The judgement is to be enforced with immediate effect.

Hellenic Steel is owned by John Manassis 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 people, rejected plans to sack 180, cut the workday from eight to five hours, and slash wages by 40 percent.

Hellenic Steel was the first major employer to utilize new employment legislation imposed as part of the European Union/International Monetary Fund austerity programme implemented by the 2009-2011 social democratic PASOK government. It allows companies to dismiss 5 percent of its staff every month, instead of the previous limit of 2 percent. Since the strike began, the company has sacked more than 100 workers.

According to one report, the Union of the Workers of

Steelworks SA issued a statement saying, "In the last assembly, using a ballot vote, 204 workers voted for the continuation of our struggle in the form of repeated 24-hour strikes and 42 voted against. Now their argument about an illegal strike does not hold anymore."

The declaration that two strikes are illegal must serve as a warning. A pattern is emerging in which the state is increasingly resorted to as a means of quelling workers' resistance to the draconian austerity measures being forced through by the Greek bourgeoisie on behalf of international finance capital.

In 2010, the army was used to smash a truckers' strike and was poised to intervene against the 2011 refuse workers' strike. Repeated threats have been made against seamen involved in an ongoing dispute to protect their pension rights.

In February last year, the army's 71st Airborne Brigade staged an exercise involving a mock confrontation with anti-austerity protesters.

The character of the caretaker government formed after the May 6 election failed to result in a viable coalition government is further evidence of high-level moves to prepare for dictatorial forms of rule. Frangos Frangoulis, a retired general and ex-chief of staff of the armed forces, was appointed defence minister and Eleftherios Economou, a former chief of police, was placed in charge of the state secret intelligence services.

In a country where the ruling elite resorted to police-state methods in the form of the 1967-1974 military junta, such appointments have a far-reaching significance.

The ruling elite are able to make such preparations only due to the trade union bureaucracy, which has systematically demobilised every struggle of the working class over the past three years. The trade unions exist only to undermine and paralyze the working class in the face of the most sustained attacks on living standards since the Nazi occupation.

In the bus drivers' dispute, according to a May 31 report on the GRReporter web site, the unions and tour bus management held a series of meetings beginning in

March in an effort to reach an agreement. The web site reports comments of the president of the federation of employees in tourism transport, Vasilis Dimitropoulos. Outlining the attacks being proposed by the company, Dimitropoulos said, “After the meeting before the last, we decided to prepare a programme in which we not only give up wage increases but also some of our benefits to the basic salary.”

The article adds, “He [Dimitropoulos] stated that they had suggested a 5 percent reduction of net wages and that the collective branch labour agreement be valid for three years.

“Dimitropoulos argued that the trade union had received verbal assurances that the employees’ proposal would be accepted. At the meeting, when the agreement had to be signed, employers had changed their mind, said Dimitropoulos. They insisted on a 25 percent cut in wages and changes in the staff’s days off.”

Calling a stoppage was the very last resort, Dimitropoulos said, explaining, “We tried all possible means to reach consensus before announcing a four-day strike. We are obliged to secure the minimum for our workers.”

For the bureaucracy the “minimum” for workers is yet more wage cuts and further cuts in living standards.

Since 2010, the official trade union federations, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), have called 17 general strikes. But the central purpose of these actions, limited to token gestures of one or two days, has been to reach an accommodation with first the PASOK regime and then the unelected government of former banker Lucas Papademos that followed it. Even these token strikes are now too much for the bureaucracy, with no general strike being held since February.



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