

Brutal police attack on steel strike in Greece

Katerina Selin
26 July 2012

Last Friday police began a violent intervention to break up the picket line maintained by striking workers at the Halyvourgia Ellados steel plant. The offensive by police is directly related to the government's plans to impose further austerity measures in the face of massive popular resistance. It stands as a warning to workers throughout Europe.

For the past nine months, workers at the steel mill in Aspropyrgos nears Athens have fought against layoffs and pay cuts. Though the strike has so far remained largely isolated, workers have courageously defended their right to a job and a decent income under conditions of huge pressure and threats from management, trade unions and the government.

In preparation for new austerity measures, Prime Minister Andonis Samaras has now decided to close down the labour dispute which has become a symbol of resistance for the whole country.

Early Friday morning, a number of police vans pulled up in front of the steel plant. Special police units broke up the picket line and opened up the factory gates as the striking workers sought to defend themselves. Following the clashes nine workers were arrested.

Police cars were stationed in front of the factory throughout the weekend. On Monday, additional police units turned up and used tear gas to disperse the remaining 200 strikers and supporters. At a meeting on Saturday, the strikers had voted by a large majority to continue their strike. On Monday evening about 2,000 demonstrators gathered in Omonia Square in central Athens to express their solidarity with the steelworkers.

The breaking up of the picket line was carried out without any proper legal basis. Just a month ago, a court had sought to declare the strike illegal by pointing to irregularities in the strike vote. Shortly afterwards workers voted in a secret ballot with a clear majority in favour of the strike, thereby rendering this argument

invalid.

The owners then threatened to close the factory. According to media reports, Samaras personally asked Labour Minister Ioannis Vrotsis, and the Minister of Public Order and Protection of Citizens, Nikos Dendias, to act quickly. "The right to work is sacred," said Samaras, "and the government supports it with all means."

Under conditions where youth unemployment is over 50 percent due to the government's policies, this argument is utterly cynical. Workers are striking precisely to defend the right to secure and reasonable jobs. The government is now using this argument as a phony excuse to break the strike without any legal justification.

The group of workers who have declared they wish to resume work and are being prevented from doing so by the strikers consist of a handful of scabs employed primarily in management. They are now being deliberately used to break the strike.

The attacks on wages and jobs at the Halyvourgia Ellados steel mill are part of the overall onslaught against workers in Greece which have led to massive losses in wages and mass unemployment.

The strike began nine months ago, when Nikolaos Manassis, the owner of the steel mill and another in the Greek city of Volos in the Thessaly region, tried to cut the working hours and wages of the company's 800 steel workers.

When workers at the Aspropyrgos plant refused to comply, the owner responded with a first round of layoffs. The workers then went on indefinite strike, during which time the company announced the sacking of 120 of the 360-strong work force. The strikers are demanding the reinstatement of all workers and a return to their previous working conditions.

While the workers are expected to work for a monthly salary of only 500 euros, the Manassis family is one of

the richest in Greece. The family is not only the leader in the Greek steel industry but also active in other areas.

Nikolaos is also an executive member of the Alpha Bank. His 35-year-old son, George, works as director of the London investment and wealth management company “Castalia”, in addition to his managerial work in the steel mills.

Under these conditions the strike has become iconic, winning broad support and solidarity from other workers. The fact that the government can now attack the strike in this way is primarily the responsibility of the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE) and its trade union federation, PAME, which played a leading role in the strike.

Following the refusal of the pro-government steelworkers union POEM to support the strike, PAME was prepared to offer assistance in the form of food and donations. However, at the same time it did everything possible to isolate the strike and prevent it from becoming the starting point of a broader movement against the government and its backers in the unions.

During the entire nine months of the strike, PAME declined to make any serious attempt to extend the action or organize solidarity. Apart from a few perfunctory acts of solidarity PAME refused to organise coordinated strikes in other factories and industrial areas.

PAME is affiliated to the country’s main trade union federation, GSEE, which in turn works closely with the governing parties.

This is why the government now feels strong enough to attack the steel workers and commence a broader wave of repression against the entire working population. Samaras is acutely aware that he can only enforce the fresh round of cuts demanded by the EU by employing the full force of the state against workers.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact