

Greece: Growing resistance to austerity measures

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22 September 2012

While the Greek government consults EU representatives about how best to lower the state deficit, wide-scale popular resistance to austerity is brewing. Greek workers are no longer ready to accept further attacks on their fundamental social rights. Although the government has not yet officially publicised its concrete proposals for the next round of austerity, numerous groups of workers are in uproar.

Thousands of doctors, some of whom have not been paid for months, have protested over the last weeks against the cuts in the health system by working to rule. On Tuesday, public sector workers demonstrated outside the Finance Ministry against the expected pay cuts.

On Thursday in Athens, the railways were hit by a 24-hour strike. Alongside protests by judges, teachers at many schools also stopped work, fearing up to a 40 percent cut in pay. Various towns witnessed demonstrations running to tens of thousands.

According to opinion polls, some three months after the last elections, only 20 percent of voters support government policy; 85 percent of those questioned fear they will be affected by the upcoming austerity measures.

The social situation of the majority of Greeks is already catastrophic. While pensions and wages have fallen by up to 60 percent, mass consumption taxes have been hiked up and millions of jobs cut. In the first three months of this year wages fell by 11.5 percent compared to the previous year.

The official unemployment rate stands at 24.4 percent and at 55 percent among young people. Nearly sixty percent of the unemployed receive no state support at all. According to the unions, the real level of unemployment is much higher.

It is forecast that by 2014 economic output will have

fallen by 25 percent since the beginning of the crisis. Increasingly, public facilities face bankruptcy. In the northern Greek municipality of Acharnes all public facilities have either closed or been massively slimmed down to avoid bankruptcy. Garbage is no longer being collected.

Each further attack on workers' rights will lead inevitably to a social explosion. This is why the Greek government and EU representatives have continually delayed the announcement of new cuts.

For months, the Greek government of Antonis Samaras (New Democracy, ND) and his Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras have been conducting talks with the so-called troika—comprising the European Central Bank (ECB), EU Commission and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Their aim is a further cut in the state budget of at least €11.5 billion. Payment of the next tranche of aid worth €31.5 billion to this highly indebted country depends on a positive report from the troika. Otherwise state bankruptcy looms.

According to press reports, the government had already presented plans for cuts of over €17 billion, out of which the troika was to choose the ones that promised them the most success. On Thursday, Samaras said that two billion euros worth of cuts were still undecided and had to be addressed, despite the troika having spoken personally with almost all the various ministries regarding the details of the cuts in each department.

While massive cuts in pensions and wages, as well as extending working hours, have long been decided, it would appear there are still differences regarding the cuts in the defence budget and over the fight against tax avoidance.

Above all, the EU representatives are discussing with the government how these attacks can be implemented

in face of massive popular opposition. The Greek unions are also involved in these talks.

The two large union associations—GSEE and ADEDY—have announced yet another impotent “general strike” for next week. This will be strictly limited to 24 hours, and has been announced long enough in advance so that it will do little damage to the employers, but is meant to demoralise workers and allow them to blow off steam. Greece has witnessed dozens of such actions over the last years.

However, the unions are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their grip over such actions. Athens has increasingly seen powerful mass demonstrations at which workers not only protest against the government but also against the unions, who essentially support the austerity measures.

To the extent that the old instruments are failing to keep the situation under control the government is increasingly reliant on more repressive means. It has not only supported and encouraged xenophobic actions by the fascist party Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), but has itself also carried out mass arrests and deportations of immigrants.

These measures represent a threat to the entire working class. As under the colonels’ military dictatorship forty years ago, protests and demonstrations could be suppressed and prevented through imposing a general curfew, as immigrants already face in reality.

If the Samaras government proves to be too weak to push through this policy, the opposition of the Coalition of the Alternative Left (SYRIZA), which emerged as the second strongest party in the last elections with 27 percent of the vote, stands ready.

SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras said on Sunday at a demonstration that he was ready to take on government office “tomorrow” should the present administration collapse. He wished to extend a “patriotic and democratic” invitation to Greeks to rebuild the country. Shortly before, he had met with the head of the EU task force for Greece Horst Reichenbach.

In the elections, SYRIZA had encouraged the illusion that the cuts could be reversed, or lessened, through negotiations with the troika. In reality, SYRIZA is prepared to collaborate most closely with the Troika to preserve Greek membership in the euro, the most important instrument of the ruling elite to attack the

social rights of workers throughout Europe.



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