

Millions of Greek workers join one-day general strike against austerity

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Hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations in Greece on Wednesday to protest against the latest package of austerity measures introduced by the coalition government led by the head of the conservative New Democracy party, Antonis Samaras. The demonstrations were the first major mobilisations since Samaras became prime minister three months ago.

Millions of workers also responded to the call for a 24-hour general strike by the country's two main trade union federations, representing workers in both the private and public sectors—the General Confederation of Employees of Greece (GSEE) and the Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY). Transport and public services, including schools, universities and hospitals, came to a halt in many parts of the country. Many flights were cancelled and ferry services were severely disrupted. Staff at the tax, customs and finance ministries declared they would continue their strike until Friday.

Earlier this week, Greek police, fire-fighters, doctors and coast guard officers carried out strike actions.

The size and impact of the strike and protests testified to growing opposition in the working class to the drive by the European and Greek bourgeoisie to reduce workers to penury in order to bail out the banks and finance houses with trillions of euros of public funds. Previous austerity packages have already plunged the Greek economy into a depression, bringing the jobless rate to 25 percent and throwing 30 percent of the population into poverty. The government estimates that the economy will contract another 25 percent by 2014.

The past week has also seen mass protests in Portugal and Spain, where austerity measures demanded by the “troika” (the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) are

threatening a similar social catastrophe.

The biggest demonstration took place in Athens, where some 70,000 people marched through the centre of the city chanting: “We won't submit to the troika!” and “EU, IMF out!” A number of placards on the demonstrations expressed solidarity with the protests in Spain and Portugal.

The state had prepared for the demonstrations in Athens by stationing 5,000 police and special forces in the city centre and erecting new bullet-proof barriers around the national parliament. When a section of the demonstration tried to break through police cordons, the police responded by firing tear gas at the crowds.

Dozens of protesters were also arrested by riot police when crowds moved towards the capital's other central square, Omonia, where the Communist Party-affiliated All Workers Militant Front (PAME) held its own separate rally.

Prominent on the demonstrations were large delegations from Greece's public services, civil servants, doctors and teachers. They were joined by large numbers of pensioners, students and youth.

Greek university and technical college professors held their own demonstration to protest against further cuts to the country's education budget. They rallied in front of the Finance and Development ministries in Syntagma Square before marching to the main building of the University of Athens.

All of these sections of workers and youth have been hit with unprecedented attacks on their living standards by successive Greek governments, social democratic as well as conservative, in the past four years. Now they have been targeted again in the latest austerity package, designed to slash €11.5 billion (\$14.87 billion) from the national budget. The cuts are due to be agreed by the Greek parliament on Thursday.

The new package of austerity measures includes:

- * further huge reductions in wages and pensions;
- * an increase in taxes and the abolition of tax exemptions for the socially needy;
- * an increase in the retirement age from 65 to 67;
- * changes in labour laws to establish more flexible working hours and make it easier for employers to lay off workers;
- * the reduction or elimination of special social and welfare benefits for pensioners, the disabled and large families;
- * the shutdown or merger of hundreds of public entities (including hospitals, schools and kindergartens);
- * the elimination of 150,000 public-sector jobs by 2015;
- * drastic cuts in funding for education and health care.

Despite the fact that previous governments have ignored all the demands raised by protesters in more than a dozen such strikes and days of action organised by the trade unions over the past three years, trade union officials sought to encourage illusions that it would be possible to pressure the Samaras regime to change course.

Ilias Iliopoulos of the civil servants' federation ADEDY declared that the demonstrations were "a warning to the government not to pass the measures." In one more hollow threat from the unions, he said, "The government must know that if it wants to push us further into a corner, we will react." This, however, was thrown out as part of a plea with the government to negotiate with the unions over the terms of the cuts.

Outside the Finance Ministry, the unions similarly begged to be consulted in formulating the cuts. The unions had addressed a servile letter to Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras and Development Minister Costis Hadjidakis calling for a meeting to discuss the cuts to professors' salaries and university and technical college budgets, which "are making the smooth operation of institutions of higher education and research problematic if not impossible."

In the letter, the union representatives asked to be included in "the mobilization of all the economic, productive, scientific, social and intellectual forces of this country" to "overcome one of the biggest crises in the country's recent history."

At a separate rally, the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and its affiliated union body, PAME, made clear they had no principled differences with the two main union bodies. In a statement from the KKE's political bureau issued prior to the demonstration, the Stalinist party called for a "pro-people way out of the crisis." It promoted the authority of the trade unions, lamely urging them to "strengthen their solidarity" and "adopt militant forms of struggle."

The leadership of the main "left" opposition organisation, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), reaffirmed its commitment to the capitalist European Union and its common currency.

Speaking to an Argentinean newspaper one week ago, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras praised the euro and put forward a series of proposals along the lines of those advanced by sections of bourgeois economists. He told the newspaper *Página*: "The euro is a unique phenomenon worldwide. We have a common currency, that is, a monetary union, but we lack a political union and a European Central Bank able to provide assistance to every country in Europe."

Recent polls show popular support for SYRIZA matching that for the ruling New Democracy. Tsipras has been holding meetings with leading European officials, including the head of the European Union task force for Greece, Horst Reichenbach. The SYRIZA leader is being groomed as a potential alternative to Samaras in the event that the current government fails to impose the dictates of the banks on the Greek working class.



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