

Social discontent grows in Greece against austerity

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21 December 2012

On Wednesday, the Greek Federation of Public Service Employees, ADEDY, called a general strike in local authorities, schools, hospitals and public enterprises. Although social discontent is growing in Greece, relatively few workers took part in the union protests.

Just a few thousand people gathered under union banners at the central Syntagma Square in front of the parliament in Athens. Only a few weeks ago hundreds of thousands came to the square to protest against the vote in parliament in favour of the fifth austerity package to be dictated by the European Union. This time round the unions were forced to admit that participation in Wednesday's strike was far lower than in previous campaigns.

The low participation is not due to workers resigning themselves to the social misery created by the EU and the Greek government. On the contrary, workers vehemently oppose the implementation of the last cuts package and in particular the massive layoffs planned for the public sector.

Spontaneous protests and demonstrations take place on almost a daily basis. Refuse workers have repeatedly taken strike action, leading to the accumulation of mounds of garbage in the streets. Doctors and nurses commenced strike action on Monday against cuts in health care and many schools remain occupied by students and teachers. Workers in the ministries frequently refuse to implement the cuts approved by the country's political elite.

Under these conditions the unions are seeking to pacify workers with their lame protests and strictly limited strike action, announced long in advance. The union leadership meets regularly with the government and is closely associated with the coalition parties. Their protests are not intended to prevent the cuts but

rather to return workers to the workplace and control social anger.

In recent years there have been dozens of such 24- or 48-hour general strikes, and workers have learned that such protests have done absolutely nothing to influence the austerity policies of the EU. That is why only a few workers participated in the unions' thoroughly cynical charade on Wednesday.

Wednesday's low turnout shows that the unions are increasingly unable to divert the enormous social anger in Greece into harmless channels. The criminal policies implemented at the behest of the EU have fuelled the anger of workers. Social misery will only escalate in the winter months as countless workers can now no longer afford to pay for heating and food, not to speak of medical care.

Hunger, anger and despair prevail on the streets of Athens. In line with the austerity measures, wages have been reduced by up to 60 percent, hundreds of thousands of workers have been sacked and the health system ruined. There no longer exists any sort of effective social safety net. Those who do have work often fail to receive their greatly reduced wages for months at a time.

In this situation taxes have been increased, making it increasingly difficult for much of the population to afford the most basic foodstuffs. Even in the summer months tens of thousands were dependent on aid from soup kitchens. Now the situation is even worse because the government has raised the tax on heating oil, which now costs 50 percent more than a year ago.

Although temperatures in Athens can fall to the freezing point, entire apartment blocks in the capital are cut off from heating due to the exorbitant prices charged. The situation is especially critical in the colder northern regions of the country. Many schools are

threatened with closure due to the cold and the failure of the government to provide statutory heating rebates.

With an unemployment rate of 25 percent and the absence of any effective social system, Greek workers are increasingly excluded from health care. Even those with health insurance coverage cannot afford the rising prices for essential drugs or cannot be treated in hospitals due to the lack of medicines and supplies.

Organizations such as Doctors of the World have reported on cases of starving children and dehydrated infants. Immigrants and their families in Greece are particularly hard hit. According to an Amnesty International report, conditions are “shameful and appalling.” Children in particular are being forced to live under “very difficult conditions.” John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International spokesman, declared, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the EU faces a humanitarian crisis, not at its borders but within its borders.”

On Saturday, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published a report on the work of trauma surgeon George Pieper, who is training colleagues in Greece on a voluntary basis. He had previously been active in many regions, including in the care of victims involved in the attacks in Oslo and Utøya. He had not seen anything, however, comparable to the misery in Greece, he told the newspaper. He reported that the welfare system in the country had ceased to function and concluded: “I wonder how much this society can take before it explodes.”

The social catastrophe has been exploited by the wealthy layers in Greece to further enrich themselves. None of the successive austerity packages has touched on the fortunes of the wealthy. On the contrary, for a period of two years the Greek government refused to punish tax evaders who had parked their money in Switzerland. It is estimated that Greek millionaires have invested around €600 billion (US\$795 billion) in Swiss accounts.

The Greek state has long since had a primary surplus, i.e., it receives more than it spends when interest and debt servicing is excluded. Every new austerity package has been used to exclusively finance the banks and speculators. Only this week the hedge fund Third Point announced it had made a \$500 million profit following its recent speculation in Greek government debt.

This glaring social polarization has led to the explosive social conditions Pieper describes. It has also

led to an extreme shift to the right not only by the unions, but also those pseudo-left groups that had previously expressed some criticisms of austerity policies. The rift between workers who want to defend their basic rights and these organizations is growing apace. This is behind the decline in turnout for the union protests.



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