

Striking Athens subway workers defy court ruling

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24 January 2013

The strike by Athens subway workers continued into its seventh day yesterday in defiance of a court ruling declaring the work action illegal. The ruling handed down Monday night allows the government to invoke emergency powers to force the strikers back to work by means of a “civil mobilisation,” which effectively conscripts the workers into the armed forces.

The main metro workers’ union, SELMA, called the strike in opposition to massive pay cuts being imposed as part of a restructuring of civil service wages. The implementation of the cuts is a condition laid down by the “troika”—the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank—for Greece receiving further loans from the European Union. The New Democracy-led coalition government has pledged to impose the wage reductions along with many other attacks on Greek workers.

In December, the Greek parliament passed a new package of austerity measures that had been agreed by euro zone finance ministers as the condition for further loans to Greece.

The metro workers are employed by state-run Urban Rail Transport, which manages Athens’ metro, tram and electric railway services. The government measures slash the salaries of all employees at public enterprises, known as DEKOs, in accordance with a new pay system for civil servants. The Urban Rail Transport wage bill is to be reduced from €97.7 million in 2012 to €74.6 million this year (a 25 percent cut). Average gross monthly wages without overtime on the metro will fall from about €2,500 to €2,038.

Other workers employed by the Athens Mass Transit System (STASY) have also gone on strike. On Tuesday, the bus, trolley and tram systems joined the strike, carrying out four- and five-hour work stoppages. There was no service on the Kifissia-Piraeus electric

railway or the tram between noon and 4 p.m. Wednesday. Workers at firms not controlled by STASY have also struck.

Coinciding with Monday’s ruling, euro zone finance ministers meeting in Brussels backed the pay-out to Greece of a fresh loan instalment worth €9.2 billion (US\$12.3 billion), following on from the €34.3 billion agreed on last month.

The attack on metro workers and other civil servants is part of the decimation of the living standards of the entire Greek working class. Workers, young people and pensioners are living in poverty conditions not witnessed since the Nazi occupation and face still more brutal austerity measures. In contrast, the bankers and ruling elite in Greece and Europe continue to have massive amounts of money shovelled at them. The vast bulk of Greece’s loans from the EU is immediately repatriated to the country’s international creditors, led by German and French banks, and most of what is left ends up in the coffers of Greece’s own banking elite.

On Tuesday, several transport workers’ unions, not including SELMA, met to discuss the dispute. Unable to contain the anger of workers at this stage, the union bureaucrats endorsed a strike by workers in all sections of public transport to be held between noon and 4 p.m. on January 29. A further 24-hour strike is being planned for January 31, according to reports.

The smashing of the strike is a priority of the New Democracy-PASOK-DIMAR (Democratic Left) coalition government, which is determined to set a new benchmark for wages and pensions that have already declined in value by 40 percent and more.

New Democracy Transport Minister Costis Hatzidakis declared at the outset of the strike that “no group of workers will be exempted from the unified salary structure.”

“There is no scope for concessions,” Hatzidakis warned. “The government cannot back down on this.” Threatening to issue a civil mobilisation order, he added, “There are limits and terms for strikes that I fear have been trampled on.”

The right-wing newspaper *Kathimerini* noted in regard to Hatzidakis’s intervention that “the measures must be implemented as part of the country’s commitments to foreign creditors.”

On Wednesday, the government reiterated its threat to break the strike. Speaking to *Radio Vima*, spokesman Simos Kedikoglou said, “If the instigators of the strike do not comply with the court’s decisions by tomorrow, they will have to face the legal repercussions. The law foresees what should be done with those leading the strikes.”

The ruling elite is well aware that such attacks cannot be imposed on a militant and angry population by democratic means. Hence its resort to authoritarian measures such as a civil mobilisation order, which would bring in the army.

Since the eruption of the financial crisis in 2008, the Greek ruling class has repeatedly relied on the army to suppress working class opposition. In 2010, the government, then headed by the social democratic PASOK, issued a civil mobilisation order and brought in the army to smash the truckers’ strike. The following year, the army was placed on standby to intervene against the refuse workers’ strike.

Under these conditions, the pseudo-lefts are playing a critical role in propping up the Greek ruling class by promoting the authority of the trade unions, which have sabotaged every attempt by workers to resist the state attacks, while playing down the determination of the bourgeoisie to impose its austerity programme by whatever means necessary.

Antonis Stamatopoulos, the leader of SELMA, is a representative of the pseudo-left ANTARSYA (Front of the Greek Anti-capitalist Left) coalition, which includes groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SEK). He stood in last May’s general election in the mainly working class “Athens B” constituency.

Responding to the court ruling against the workers, Stamatopoulos shrugged his shoulders, commenting, “Civil mobilisation? They can enforce it if they want. Maybe they should come here with tanks to force us back to work.”

In a country that has witnessed the atrocities carried out by Hitler’s fascist hordes, with the collusion of sections of the Greek bourgeoisie, and the “Regime of the Colonels” between 1967 and 1974, such a light-minded dismissal of the government’s threat to bring in the army is politically criminal. What is required is an appeal to the entire Greek working class to rally behind the metro workers and take up a struggle to bring down the austerity government of the bankers and big business.

The transport workers’ stoppage is the latest in a series of strikes testifying to profound social tensions. Last week, Hellenic Postbank workers struck for 48 hours to protest the state-owned operation’s privatisation and sell-off. Doctors and other medical staff have taken strike action.

On Tuesday, Elefsina Shipyard workers, who have not been paid for six months, began a series of 25-hour rolling strikes. The workers are also protesting the fact that only a portion of their wages from 2010 have been paid, as well as the threat of the shipyard being closed down due to the government’s failure to pay for the construction of three navy vessels.



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