

Political lessons of the Athens subway strike

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The brutal state suppression of the Athens subway workers' strike is a clear warning to the international working class.

On Thursday, the Greek government placed striking metro workers under martial law, forcing them back to work under pain of imprisonment. Early Friday morning, hundreds of police stormed the central subway depot, arresting at least ten workers and injuring one. Solidarity strikes by other public transport employees were declared illegal on Sunday.

The strike by subway workers expressed the intense popular opposition to the sweeping attacks on Greek workers' living standards dictated by the European Union and implemented by the New Democracy-led coalition government. The latest package of cuts, adopted in November, requires new public-sector wage cuts of up to 25 percent.

The subway workers' struggle was widely seen as a challenge to the endless round of austerity measures that are impoverishing broad sections of the population. Hence the widespread support for the strikers in the working class.

With its invocation of emergency powers and use of state violence against the subway workers, the Greek ruling class has made clear it intends to forcibly crush all opposition to the diktat of the EU and the banks. Conservative Prime Minister Antonis Samaras has already declared he will take similar action against further strikes.

All claims that it is possible to shift the policy of the state by means of protests and limited strikes have been shattered.

Already in 2010, as Europe-wide EU austerity programs began, several major strikes—by Greek truckers, Spanish air traffic controllers, and French oil refinery workers—were ended by police and army interventions.

What is occurring is a historic transformation of class

relations. Two decades after the collapse of the USSR, the European ruling class condemns the working class to a future of poverty and social deprivation. Increasingly, the repressive machinery of the state is mobilized to criminalize and smash all forms of collective working class resistance.

The immediate capitulation of the unions and pseudo-left forces to the smashing of the Athens metro strike underscores the significance of the struggle of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to expose these organizations and break their influence over the working class. They seek to limit workers' struggles to impotent, symbolic protests.

The working class can successfully mobilize its industrial power only by building new organizations and a new leadership to take the conduct of struggles out of the hands of the unions and their pseudo-left allies. Strikes and other mass actions must be directed to the political struggle to bring down the government and replace it with a workers' government based on socialist policies.

Immediately after martial law had been declared, the union of Greek metro workers, SELMA, called off the walkout and ordered the strikers to return to work. It announced plans to challenge the strike-breaking measures in court in an attempt to cover up its capitulation.

As a gesture of protest, the other transit unions called limited solidarity strikes. The major union federations, ADEDY (Civil Servants' Confederation) and GSEE (General Confederation of Greek Workers), criticized the strikebreaking, but limited their response to a token 24-hour strike to be held in early February.

The unions have collaborated in the destruction of workers' living standards. They have rejected the political mobilization of the working class to bring down a series of unpopular governments that have overseen the EU's class-war social agenda. They are

prepared at most to organize intermittent, token strikes in order to contain and defuse working class opposition.

In invoking martial law, the government acted with the confidence that the unions would work to demobilize working class opposition.

Another key ally of the government is the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), along with other pseudo-left groups in Greece. In the elections last June, SYRIZA sought to appease popular anger with limited criticisms of the social cuts. It emerged as the strongest opposition party, with 27 percent of the vote. Even at that time, however, SYRIZA stressed its support for the bourgeois state and the EU, proposing only marginal changes to their deficit-slashing policies.

Since then, SYRIZA has shifted even further to the right. At the same time the strike by metro workers was under state attack, Tsipras was in the US reassuring the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the American ruling elite that “his party is a reliable partner.” At a press conference in New York, he criticized the actions of the Greek government, while implying that the subway workers also bore responsibility for the crisis.

Indicating his hostility to the struggles of the working class, he said, “The last thing our country needs is an escalation of tensions and social conflicts.”

His party colleague and SYRIZA parliamentary deputy, Dimitris Papadimoulis, was even blunter, accusing metro workers in a radio interview of having enjoyed privileges for years. SYRIZA, he stressed, had nothing to do with the strike.

The hostile attitude of the trade unions and pseudo-left groups demonstrates that in defense of their rights, workers confront not only the state apparatus, but also its subsidiary agencies, including the unions and their pseudo-left allies.

The defense of the right to strike and the right to basic social necessities requires an independent mobilization of the working class aimed at establishing a workers’ government pledged to nationalize the banks and major corporations under the democratic control of the working population.

Such a struggle can succeed only as part of a European and international movement of workers directed against the capitalist system, its state apparatus, and its defenders in the trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left organizations. This requires the building of the ICFI as a revolutionary

party to oppose the EU with the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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