

Greek government imposes martial law on ferry strikers

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On Tuesday evening, the Greek government imposed martial law on striking ferry workers and mobilized the police to break up their picket lines. The workers had gone on strike to protest against job losses and wage cuts and demand the payment of overdue wages. Some of the workers have received no wages for months.

The strike shut down sea transport between the Greek mainland and the country's many islands, causing food shortages in smaller islands that have no airport.

Ferry crews went on strike last Thursday. The walkout was initially called for 48 hours, but was extended for two further 48-hour periods before it was broken by the government.

The New Democracy-led coalition government, which also includes the social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left, invoked emergency powers late Tuesday in the form of a "civil mobilization," formally conscripting the ferry workers into military service and ordering them to return to work. Workers who defied the order were subject to prison terms of up to five years.

On Wednesday morning, police occupied the central port of Piraeus to prevent workers from attempting to block the introduction of strike-breakers.

The Union of Seafarers (PNO) reacted to the imposition of martial law by immediately breaking off the strike. Greece's two major trade union federations, ADEDY (Civil Servants' Confederation) and GSEE (General Confederation of Greek Workers) on Wednesday called for solidarity strikes in the region of Attica, which includes both Athens and Piraeus.

The solidarity strikes were strictly limited, however. Buses and trams remained in their depots for just four hours and there were virtually no broader work actions in the public services. At noon on Wednesday, thousands of workers gathered in Piraeus to

demonstrate against the government's action. The demonstrators marched from the port to the Maritime Ministry.

The imposition of martial law against the ferry strikers came just two weeks after martial law measures were used to break a strike by Athens subway workers. The Greek state, in violation of basic democratic rights, is imposing a de facto ban on any effective strike action. It is also violating international laws that permit forced labor only within clearly defined limits.

The abolition of the right to strike and criminalization of striking workers hark back to the police state conditions that prevailed under the fascist regime of the Greek colonels some 40 years ago.

The Greek government has now resorted to martial law on four separate occasions to force striking workers back to work since the European Union began dictating austerity measures for Greece. Martial law was called against truck drivers in 2010, against striking refuse workers in 2011, and against the subway workers and ferry workers this month.

As soon as workers seek to carry out actions that go beyond symbolic trade union protests and seriously impact business interests, they are forced back to work by the state. Any form of effective collective resistance against the relentless austerity measures that have already cost tens of thousands of jobs and slashed wages and pensions has been effectively declared illegal, not only by the right-wing New Democracy, but also by PASOK and the Democratic Left (DIMAR), a split-off from SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left).

The virtual abolition of the right to strike is accompanied by increasing police brutality and the proliferation of police state methods. Last week it came to light that four suspected robbers with an anarchist background had been badly beaten by police following

their arrest. Last year it was revealed that police handed out similar treatment to anti-fascist demonstrators. It is well known that a large percentage of police officers are members or supporters of the fascist Golden Dawn (Chrysi Avgi) party.

The attack on the right to strike in Greece is being carried out in collaboration with and support from other European governments and EU institutions. The so-called “troika”—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission and European Central Bank (ECB)—monitors every measure taken by the Greek government and has deployed observers to watch over specific Greek ministries. At the start of the year, Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (ND) spoke with German Chancellor Angela Merkel during a visit to Berlin and was told in no uncertain terms that there could be no slowdown in the imposition of social cuts.

Having plunged the Greek population into social misery to satisfy the demands of the banks and speculators, the Greek state is now utilizing naked repression to suppress working class opposition. But Greece today is the face of Europe tomorrow. Just as Greece set the pace for the spread of austerity measures across the continent, so its turn to police state methods will be copied by governments across Europe.

An indispensable role in the imposition of these attacks is played by the trade unions in Greece and across Europe. Without the non-stop efforts of the Greek unions to dissipate and undermine workers’ resistance to austerity, it would have been impossible for the unstable government of Samaras to survive.

The European trade unions either tacitly or openly support the attacks on Greek workers, just as they collaborate in the attacks on workers in their own countries. They do not seriously oppose the de facto criminalization of strikes.

A spokesperson of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Emanuela Bonacina, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that her organization had no plans for action to defend the Greek ferry workers or oppose the assault on democratic rights in Greece. The issue had not even come up for discussion. A similarly dismissive reply came from the press office of the German Trade Union Federation (DGB).

The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), to which the PTO is affiliated, restricted its response to a protest note to Samaras. ITF spokesman

Sam Dawson told the WSW: “The PTO asked us to intervene directly with the government, which we have done. If they need more help, they know they can count on the ITF.”

In Greece, the unions are trying to contain workers’ anger over the government’s actions with a handful of symbolic actions. Following the suppression of the subway workers strike last month they organized a few small solidarity actions, which they quickly ended so as not to threaten the government. The actions taken on Wednesday were of the same character.

The unions receive critical backing from pseudo-left groups such as SYRIZA and the Greek Communist Party (KKE). SYRIZA Chairman Alexis Tsipras traveled recently to Berlin and Washington to reassure the US and German governments that his party represented no danger and to guarantee the repayment of Greek debt. Tsipras has repeatedly emphasized that SYRIZA has no intention of overturning the government or forcing Samaras to resign.

KKE Chairman Aleka Papariga marched at the head of the demonstration in Piraeus and called for solidarity with the ferry workers. At the same time, the KKE’s own union federation, PAME, which has the strongest representation within the PNO, played the central role in calling off the strike.



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