

Greek strikes continue as unemployment, poverty hit record levels

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16 February 2013

In the face of a deepening slump and growing government repression, workers throughout Greece have continued strikes and protests ahead of a general strike February 20. These struggles are being waged under conditions in which the austerity measures dictated by the European Union are creating unbearable conditions for masses of working people.

The Greek government's Statistics Agency released data on Thursday showing that unemployment has hit a new record high as the country's economy continues to slide deeper into depression.

According to the official figures, the jobless rate rose to 27 percent in November, up from 26.6 percent the previous month and 20.8 percent in November of last year. The figures indicated that another 30,000 workers lost their jobs in November.

The number of employed workers continued to fall, dropping by 0.8 percent to 3.6 million, while the number of unemployed rose once again by 1.5 percent to 1.4 million. Those described as "inactive"—including many who have given up looking for work—remained relatively unchanged at 3.3 million.

Hardest hit are younger workers, with a staggering 61.7 percent of adults under the age of 24 on the unemployment lines.

Meanwhile, Greece's private sector union federation, the GSEE, issued a report Thursday projecting that 3.9 million Greeks out of a total population of 11 million will be living below the official poverty line by the end of this year. Greece's poverty line is set at €7,200 (US\$9,700) per year for an individual.

Among those taking to the streets of Athens on Friday were the disabled, dozens of them in wheelchairs, who protested outside of the Finance Ministry against government cuts to their salaries and pensions implemented as part of the government's austerity programme.

Meanwhile, several hundred pensioners rallied outside the Labor Ministry to protest new regressive tax increases that have reduced already inadequate pensions.

"We are not just talking about some problems. They are taking our lives away," Dimos Koumbouris, leader of Greece's main pensioners' association, told the Associated Press. "We can't pay our electricity bills, or the emergency taxes. We

haven't enough for our medicines, and it's putting our lives in danger."

In the last week, Greek municipal workers, media workers, farmers, students and other groups have struck and protested against the brutal austerity measures of the New Democracy/PASOK/Democratic Left coalition government.

On Monday, media workers took strike action for the eighth consecutive day to protest wage cuts and layoffs and to demand the right to a collective contract. Journalists and technical staff at Greece's newspapers, radio stations and TV channels were involved in the action. During the day, media employees shouting slogans, including "enough is enough", marched from the headquarters of the Athens Daily Newspaper Journalists' Union headquarters to the parliament. In the afternoon, the strike was joined by some employees of privately owned media groups.

The workers are demanding an end to layoffs and wage cuts and the signing of collective labour contracts with publishers. Among their demands are the revocation of the dismissals of eight journalists at municipal radio station 9.84 and the renewal of fixed-term contracts of 74 journalists ERT broadcast staff after their removal. As a result of the austerity measures and cutbacks imposed by media groups since the beginning of mass austerity, some 3,000 media employees have been made redundant in the last three years. Workers have also suffered a 10 to 20 percent reduction in their wages.

The action was called by the Panhellenic Federation of Journalists' Unions and will continue until 6 a.m. Wednesday.

One media report cited striking journalists who said that "medieval conditions" in the media sector not only "strangle" low-wage earners and their families, but are also a threat to the freedom of the press and democracy.

Municipal workers held a rally Wednesday morning at Klafthmonos Square in central Athens, the first day of a 48-hour strike. Members of the POE-OTA trade union include refuse workers as well as town hall staff. They struck to demand job guarantees and the disbursement of back pay.

As well as regular protests in the capital, almost daily protests have occurred in the second largest city in Greece, Thessaloniki. On Monday, thousands of students protested against cuts in the education budget, including plans to close

many academic facilities. On Wednesday and Thursday, workers struck throughout the city as part of the municipal workers' strike. These included archaeologists who protested at the city's historic Arch of Galerius in the city centre. Also striking during the week in the city were workers employed by the IKA health care fund, which is refusing to renew the contracts of 500 employees due to budget cuts.

The latest strikes and protests take place ahead of a 24-hour general strike to be held on February 20, called by the GSEE private sector and Adedy public sector trade union federations. This is the latest of many limited and restricted stoppages called by the federations since 2010. Their main aim is to use such events to dissipate mass opposition to the hated measures being imposed by the Greek government on behalf of international finance capital.

Such pro-forma actions, during which well-heeled union bureaucrats issue the occasional criticism of this or that austerity measure, are the means through which the entire edifice of savage attacks on working people has been imposed.

The strike has been called under conditions in which the government has stepped up its use of fascist-era repression to smash any strike that threatens to go beyond the limited remit set by the union bureaucracy and their backers in the various pseudo-left groups. The Greek ruling elite, in violation of basic democratic rights, is imposing a de facto ban on any effective strike action. Last week, martial law via a "Civil Mobilisation Order" was imposed by the government to break a strike by ferry workers. The same measures were used two weeks before to break a strike by Athens subway workers.

Brutal assaults by riot police against all those protesting austerity attacks have become commonplace in Greece over the last years. This week, farmers protesting government policies, including a decision to increase taxes in the farming sector, are only the latest to face such state-organised violence. On Wednesday, riot police and special forces were used to break up protests. Farmers coming from the prefectures of Fthiotida and Viotia were met on the highway by the riot police squads who used tear gas to disperse them. The attacks left four farmers with injuries, and 12 arrests were made.

Further clashes took place between farmers and police Thursday at the Athens-Patras to Corinth Velo road, with police making four arrests. More arrests were made Friday when police confronted farmers from Serres.

Just before the use of the riot police against farmers, the right-wing daily *Kathimerini* noted February 11, "The government has been heavy-handed against strikers, issuing civil mobilisation orders against Athens metro workers and seamen, but it has taken a softer stance against farmers who are seeking concessions."

The use of naked violence to suppress growing discontent goes hand in hand with moves by the Greek state to effectively end the right of workers to withdraw their labour—a right previously protected under the Greek constitution. As well as

the now frequent use of civil mobilisation orders to force the termination of strikes, last Sunday's *To Vima* newspaper reported that conservative New Democracy prime minister Antonis Samaras, alongside his labour minister, Yiannis Vrotsis, is seeking legislation requiring the vote of a majority of union members in order for any industrial action to go ahead. A law is also being considered to give management the right to lock out workers and close their factories and enterprises in the event of a strike of any duration. With these moves, the government, backed by the European Union and International Monetary Fund, is making its preparations to confront the mass opposition that must develop in response to even greater levels of impoverishment.

Despite the unprecedented attacks on the wages, pensions and welfare benefits of millions of people, even worse is to come. On February 14, the collective agreements of 500,000 Greek employees across 42 sectors expired. The immediate effect of this is that employers now have carte blanche to abolish any bonus payments, thus immediately decreasing wages. The *Proto Thema* daily noted that such measures would result in a 15 to 30 percent drop in wages if new sector contracts, as is likely, are not signed.

Companies and employees now have a three-month window to agree on new collective contracts, but it is expected that many firms will seek to force workers to sign individual contacts on lower wages.

On March 31, a national general collective labour agreement covering 350,000 workers also expires. On that date those workers will automatically lose marriage benefit payment (10 percent of their salary). Were another collective contact not agreed, they would also lose a bonus that increases their salary by €58.6 every three years. As a result of previous austerity cuts, this bonus has been frozen until unemployment drops below 10 percent. Its restoration is in reality nullified with official unemployment now standing at 27 percent and rapidly approaching 30 percent.



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