

Workers mount 24-hour national strike against social attacks in Greece

Christoph Dreier
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Tens of thousands of Greek workers went on strike on Wednesday to protest against the austerity measures of the government and its attacks on the right to strike. The government has announced it plans to continue its austerity program unabated.

In Athens, thousands of workers gathered in squares throughout the city and marched to a central demonstration in front of the parliament building in Syntagma Square. Further protests were held in Thessaloniki, Heraklion, Chania and other cities.

The 24-hour strike was carried out by workers from both the public and private sectors. Trains remained in depots and ferries in ports. Staff at hospitals, offices and power stations as well as teachers and lawyers stopped work. Personnel at the airports struck for two four-hour periods.

In taking part in the strike, seamen risked prison sentences of up to five years. The government ended their strike two weeks ago by placing ferry workers under martial law and forcing them back to work. Despite this repression, seamen voted to participate in the latest strike.

Hundreds of farmers who are traditionally regarded as part of more conservative layers also took part in the protests. They occupied the highway from Athens to Thessaloniki with their tractors to protest against the increase in fuel prices and the removal of tax exemptions.

Already on Tuesday journalists at newspapers and TV stations had stopped work, thereby largely preventing reports on the state visit by the French President François Hollande. The one-day strike was preceded by numerous selective walkouts over the last two weeks.

At the demonstration in Athens workers shouted slogans such as “No to the euro” and “Stop the memorandum”. A delegation travelled to the

demonstration from the occupied building materials factory Vio.Me in Thessaloniki. Workers have taken over production at the factory since February 12 after the owners left without paying outstanding wages.

The demonstration was directed against the latest austerity package, which was adopted by the Greek parliament in November last year at the behest of the EU. It entails the closure of hospitals, schools and universities, as well as wage cuts up to 25 percent in the public sector plus mass layoffs.

These brutal attacks only serve to worsen the already inhumane living conditions of workers for the benefit of the banks and speculators. Unemployment has now reached 27 percent, with only one in three youth active in a job or some form of training.

Those who have kept their jobs face significant wage cuts. One survey reports that the bottom 90 percent of society has lost an average of 38 percent of income during the past three years and in many cases the reduced wages are not paid. Two-thirds of workers in the private sector have received no regular salary in recent months.

The government has made clear in recent weeks that it will not tolerate any resistance to its policies. In addition to the seamen, metro drivers were also forced back to work. The government is determined to stop any strikes that have a real impact on the economy of the country.

Lamprini, a protester in Athens, told the WSWs that he was demonstrating to defend the rights of workers. He said, “They took away most of our workers' rights, bringing us back to the 19th century—and I am afraid we will have to shed again our blood to regain our dignity. We are fighting once again for land and freedom against a government that sells away our people's land and takes away our freedom. For me the way to win is

by going on a general strike for as long as it takes, and I believe we are very near to that.”

Such views are widespread. The anger of Greek workers is enormous, but significantly fewer people are participating in demonstrations than was the case last year. The jewelry designer Panayiota, who also took part in the demonstration, told the WSWs this was due to growing police violence and the role of unions.

"The leaders of the unions are working essentially for themselves and are closely linked to the government," she said, "They are paid to control workers. They often organize demonstrations just to show they are doing something, but not to genuinely mobilize. People understand that and so no longer come to the demonstrations.”

The two major trade union confederations, the GSEE and ADEDY, have worked with the government in recent years to impose the cuts against workers. When the government imposed martial law, they ended strikes immediately and consoled workers with the prospect of Wednesday's protest, which they announced far in advance and organized in such a fashion as to minimize any consequences for the Greek economy. The level of mobilization was very low and the unions refused to call upon all transport workers to strike.

The Greek government of the conservative New Democracy (ND), social democratic PASOK and Democratic Left (DIMAR - a split off from SYRIZA) relies on the support of the unions and has already made clear it will not budge on its austerity measures. It announced on Monday it would suspend 1,900 layoffs out of a total of more than 25,000, but this is a mere symbolic gesture.

In the coming days, government officials will meet with the troika (International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank) to negotiate the payment of the next tranche of loans of 2.8 billion euros. The troika has its observers in all ministries and has already made it clear that it will not back down on its demands for more austerity.

During his visit on Tuesday, French President Francois Hollande insisted that the cuts be enforced in accordance with the credit agreement, so that French companies can set up business in the country. He also expressed his full support for the government of Prime Minister Andonis Samaras (ND).



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