More mass layoffs in Greece

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30 April 2013

On Sunday, the Greek parliament agreed the dismissal of 15,500 public service workers in expedited proceedings, as well as the reduction of the country's minimum wage, the expansion of property taxes and the extension of teachers working hours.

Specifically, the government has agreed to put 2,000 public service workers on the street by June 1. Another 2,000 workers will be laid off by the end of the year, and they will be followed in 2014 by another 11,500 layoffs.

The 15,500 layoffs are only a small part of the job cuts in the public sector. Some 25,000 workers have already been placed in a so-called labour reserve, in which they receive a percentage of their salary for a year and can search for a new job, only to end up on the dole. In addition, for the past two years, for every five workers who retire only one is replaced by a new hire, with hirings being made primarily in the tax authority. All these measures are being used to cut a total of 150,000 government jobs by 2015.

In addition to these draconian measures, the government has decided to extend the working week for teachers by two hours without any extra pay, which will further worsen learning conditions in schools. The hated property tax, which affects many workers in Greece and is collected directly along with the electricity bill, was extended for another year and only reduced by 15 percent.

Just before the end of the parliamentary debate—which was cut short by the government, bringing all the proposals into a single law—Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras (independent) introduced a motion to reduce the minimum wage for the public sector, which was then voted on together with the other motions.

Newly hired workers can now be paid just €490 (US$642) instead of the current €580 ($760) per month. For the under 25 year-olds, the limit was even reduced to €427 ($559). The minimum wage was lowered only last year by almost €70 and is now being cut again.

All these measures were agreed unanimously by the three government parties: the conservative New Democracy (ND), the social democratic PASOK, and the Democratic Left (DIMAR, a split-off from SYRIZA). A total of 168 MPs voted for the new law; 123 opposed it.

The government is openly violating the Greek constitution, which since 1911 has prescribed that public sector employees are protected against dismissal. The law was originally enacted to stabilize the state apparatus and to immunize it against political fluctuations. The last time there were extensive political sackings was under the military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974.

The present legal breach was dictated directly by the so-called troika of the EU Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Representatives of the troika had made payment of an aid instalment due in March of over €2.8 billion dependent on the enactment of the relevant legal texts, and in particular insisted on the need for layoffs. The payment was finally agreed on Monday evening. In mid-May, the decision will be taken over the next tranche of €6 billion.

Eighty percent of these sums go directly to the banks and speculators who invested in Greek government bonds, and whose returns are being secured by the emergency loans. The austerity measures are to ensure that this money is taken from workers in the long-term.

The mass layoffs and pay cuts agreed will further intensify social misery in Greece. The heavily manipulated unemployment rate according to *Eurostat* already stands at 27.2 percent, higher than in any other euro zone country. Among young people, it is more than double this figure.

The troika's austerity diktats have forced Greek workers down to the level of developing countries. According to the unions, about 35 percent of Greeks have already been forced to drop out of medical insurance and rely on being able to pay all health care costs themselves. More and more children do not have enough food and are malnourished.

A long-term study by Oxford University has just confirmed how seriously the austerity measures in Europe and America are affecting workers' health. The study finds that infections with the deadly HIV virus in Greece have increased by 200 percent since 2011 because of budget cuts in preventative work. Moreover, the country has reported its first case of malaria for decades, because programs to combat mosquitoes have been stopped.

Given this disastrous situation, the imposition of further austerity measures is a clear warning to all European workers. Despite all the differences between them, European governments are agreed on the dismantling of workers' social rights. They are willing to destroy entire societies to defend the profits of the banks and corporations.

In this, they are increasingly prepared to disregard their own legal norms and resort to more aggressive methods. In January and February, Greek workers were forced back to work under martial law. In March, the ruling ND collaborated with the fascists of Golden Dawn. Under cover of the European institutions, the government has now breached the Greek constitution and tens of thousands of workers will be thrown onto the streets.

The financial elite can only act so ruthlessly because they can be sure of the support of the unions and their pseudo-left defenders. In recent years, the trade unions have sabotaged any serious struggle by workers and the oppressed. Instead, they have organized hundreds of toothless protests and strikes, which were discussed in advance with the government, and only served to demoralize workers.

On Sunday, the public service union ADEDY had again called for such a demonstration outside the parliament building. Only a few thousand people responded to this call; the police spoke of just 800 participants.