Greek protests against ban on strikes

Christoph Dreier
14 May 2013

On Monday, the Greek police served 88,000 high school teachers with civil mobilization orders. The government is forcing teachers to work and seeking to prevent a possible strike by teachers against the most recent austerity package dictated by the European Union. The Greek Supreme Court has rejected a request from the teachers union, the OLME, for a preliminary injunction opposing the order for forced labour.

Thousands of people gathered on Monday evening in front of the OLME union hall in Athens and marched to the parliament building on Syntagma Square to protest against the government's actions. Protests also occurred in other cities such as Patras and Thessaloniki.

The Federation of Public Service unions, ADEDY, refused to organize a solidarity strike for teachers on Friday, which would have disrupted exam timetables. Instead, it has called for a strike on Tuesday and announced a joint action on Thursday with the GSEE, the union federation for private-sector workers.

Some teachers wore uniforms of the military junta which had ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. "They are once again ordering us to wear uniforms," one woman wrote on a placard. Another placard read: "Today me, tomorrow all of you". The teachers were drawing parallels to the dictatorship of the colonels that suppressed all labour disputes by force of arms and mobilized young people en masse.

In reality, the parallels run deep. A similar situation is not far away. In January, the government coalition of the conservative New Democracy (ND), social democratic PASOK and Democratic Left (DIMAR) forced striking metro drivers back to work by issuing a similar injunction and mobilizing the police. In February, sailors on strike because their wages had not been paid for months received the same treatment.

Now the government is going one step further. It ordered the civilian mobilization even before the teachers had voted on a strike. Last Friday the leadership of OLME agreed on a possible strike to coincide with the start of upcoming final exams for students. Now, if teachers opt to strike, they could face up to five years in prison and dismissal.

The move by the government against a possible labour dispute last Sunday made clear it is prepared to brutally suppress any resistance to its austerity program. The timing of the measure was no coincidence. On Monday evening the finance ministers of the euro group met to decide on the payment of two loan instalments to Greece.

An extra two hours weekly working time for teachers, and the elimination of up to 10,000 teaching posts, against which the strike was aimed, were among the conditions laid down by the EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the payment of a total of €7.5 billion (US$9.7 billion). The finance ministers finally approved the payments and attested to Athens "important progress" in the enforcement of austerity programs.

There is no doubt that the dictatorial actions taken by the Greek government of Antonis Samaras (ND) were closely coordinated with his European counterparts. Similar measures are being taken across the continent. Just last month the Danish "left coalition" government locked out more than 70,000 teachers for four weeks to also impose longer working hours without pay.

In Greece, the education minister, Constantinos Arvanitopoulos, cynically justified the mobilization order with the impending exams. "We are determined to protect pupils' and parents' peace of mind in exceptional circumstances," he said.

In fact, the cuts and layoffs that teachers are opposing are part of the government campaign to dismantle the entire public education system. Hundreds of schools and dozens of universities are to be merged or closed. The 10,000 teaching jobs are part of a wider plan to eliminate a total of 150,000 public service jobs.

© World Socialist Web Site

Already, two-thirds of Greek youth are unemployed.

The government can enforce these barbaric social attacks because it has the full support of the unions. The head of the OLME, Nikos Papachristos, made it clear from the start that the union would not oppose a mobilization order. In the cases of metro drivers and seafarers, the unions also played a key role in enforcing the ban on strikes.

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), to which OLME is affiliated, has said nothing about the mobilization order. The German teachers' union (GEW), which is currently organizing a sell-out of German teachers, has also remained silent.

In Greece, the main opposition party, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), is playing a key role in supporting the government's course. In several press releases, the party called upon the government to withdraw the mobilization order and the measures taken against teachers, in order to enter "public negotiations" with teachers after the exams. SYRIZA evidently wants to delay the confrontation with teachers until after the exams. Party spokesman Panos Skouletis has already justified the mobilization under "exceptional circumstances".

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site