

Greek teachers defy military mobilisation orders

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Greek teachers have voted to oppose the mobilisation order of the government and commence a strike on Friday to coincide with the start of the annual exam period. At the same time, the OLME teachers' union is doing all it can to prevent the strike from taking place.

On Tuesday evening, regional conferences of the union took place, at which 95 percent of those present voted for strike action. Participation at the conferences was estimated at 10,000 to 20,000. The union has a total of 88,000 members.

The teachers voted by an overwhelming majority to defy the dictatorial actions of the government, which has placed teachers under martial law and invoked civilian mobilisation measures, attempting to force teachers back to work. Any teacher who goes on strike now faces imprisonment of up to five years and dismissal. Education Minister Konstantinos Arvanitopoulos (New Democracy, ND) said on Wednesday that he would seek to ensure that exams begin as scheduled on Friday.

The Greek government has now issued bans on strikes on three separate occasions this year. In January, it introduced martial law measures against striking metro drivers, and in February, it moved against sailors who had stopped work to demand payment of back wages. So far, the government, working closely with the unions and the police, has been able force striking workers back to work.

The teachers are the first profession to openly defy the government and the public service trade union federation, ADEDY, despite all the threats made against them. They are seeking to defend themselves against government proposals to extend their working hours by two hours without pay, sack up to 10,000 teachers, and transfer 4,000 teachers to remote areas.

The determination and defiance shown by the

teachers is an expression of broad opposition amongst Greek workers to the austerity dictates of the government. Teachers have already received wide support.

A number of other groups of workers and professions have officially signaled their support. No fewer than six rounds of austerity measures dictated by the European Union (EU) have caused a social disaster of historic proportions in Greece. Hunger and poverty have returned to the streets, and the official unemployment rate has risen to over 27 percent. Many teachers earn no more than €585 a month.

In their struggle, the Greek teachers confront not only the government and the state apparatus, but also the trade unions and their pseudo-left defenders.

ADEDY has systematically isolated the teachers. It turned down a call from the teachers' union to call other school staff out on strike. Instead, the union federation organised mini-demonstrations and some symbolic actions in an attempt to cover up their betrayal.

On Wednesday, representatives of the regional trade union organisations of teachers met to evaluate the voting results and discuss their next steps. Details of the discussions have not yet been made public. Several union representatives once again called upon ADEDY and the private sector union federation, GSEE, to join their strike on Friday. Apparently, they hope that such futile appeals will undermine the resolve of teachers to strike.

The national executive of the OLME teachers' union responded to its members' vote for strike action by immediately entering negotiations with the government and opposition parties to discuss ways of averting the strike.

On Wednesday the chairman of OLME, Nikos

Papahristos, met with representatives of the conservative ruling party ND, and later with representatives of its social-democratic coalition partner, PASOK. Papahristos explained that both parties had promised to forward OLME's demands to the Ministry of Education.

Papahristos was himself an ND member until he was expelled a week ago because of his union's strike threat. He had reiterated before the government strike ban that the union would abide by it. Faced with angry teachers, he is now trying to prevent the strike by the back door.

After the meeting with ND and PASOK, he announced that he would call off the strike if the government withdrew the ban. "If the mobilisation order is canceled and an open dialogue takes place we are prepared to call off the strike," he said.

OLME's call for an "open dialogue" is supported by the main opposition party, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA). Papahristos had already met with SYRIZA chairman Alexis Tsipras on Tuesday. At the start of the week, SYRIZA had called upon the government to withdraw its mobilisation order and commence new negotiations with OLME after the exams. Otherwise "law and order" were at risk, Tsipras said.

In fact, an "open dialogue" with the government only serves to delay the attacks on teachers until after the exams.

The response by ADEDY, OLME and SYRIZA illustrates the reactionary role played by these organisations. As conflicts heighten between the financial elite and the working class, the unions are moving ever closer to the state apparatus.

Tsipras clarified the class position of his party when he spoke just as teachers received their mobilisation orders. In a speech to the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV) on Monday, he appealed for reconciliation between political camps and stressed that all sides must take responsibility for the country and future generations.

Even if OLME does issue a call for strike action, it is already clear it will seek the first opportunity to isolate the teachers and call off the strike. To defend their rights, workers must break with the union straitjacket and make the strike by teachers the starting point of a broad mobilisation against not only the government but

also its pseudo-left supporters.



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