The betrayal of the Greek teachers' strike

Chris Marsden
18 May 2013

A meeting of the local presidents of Greece's secondary school union, OLME, delivered the final stab in the back on Thursday, scuttling a planned series of strikes during national pre-university Panhellenic Exams.

In doing so, the union bureaucracy has delivered a serious blow to the entire Greek working class and strengthened the government and state forces as they impose yet more brutal austerity measures. OLME's partners in crime include the main union federations and the pseudo-left opposition party, SYRIZA.

Greek teachers had voted repeatedly and overwhelmingly (with more than 90 percent in favour) to oppose a two-hour increase in weekly hours and mandatory reassignments to other secondary schools by launching strike action beginning May 17. The teachers' stand was made in opposition to plans to dismantle the public education system by closing schools and universities and shedding 10,000 teaching jobs, part of a wider plan to eliminate 150,000 public service jobs.

The government responded by issuing civil mobilisation orders against over 88,000 teachers. Since the imposition of austerity measures began in Greece in 2008, these orders have been used with increasing frequency to outlaw industrial action, in defiance of Greece's own constitution, which states that labour may never be coerced. The order imposes military discipline on workers, ostensibly to "secure the national defence in a time of war and to face emergencies," carrying the threat of mass firings, arrests and jail sentences.

This is the third time such an order has been used against workers this year. It was employed in January to smash a strike by Athens subway workers and then extended for use against 2,500 rail and tram workers who came out in solidarity.

The government's action against the teachers provoked determined resistance. Local teachers associations voted to defy the orders and strike, with civil mobilization order papers burned en-masse. A demonstration of several thousand in Athens saw teachers dress in army fatigues to signify a return to conditions associated with the 1967-1974 military junta.

Publicly, the posture of OLME's leaders was to seek the assistance of the main union federations for a strike. But this was political theatre on OLME's part, which never intended for the strike to go ahead. Its president, Nikos Papachristos, a supporter of the ruling New Democracy party, had already declared that if civil mobilisations were imposed, which he knew would happen, "we will return to schools with our heads held high."

A pro-forma appeal for a 48-hour general strike on Thursday and Friday coinciding with the exams was made to the union federation for public sectors workers (ADEDY). It was rejected. ADEDY declared its opposition to the disruption of exams—as if this was the issue under conditions where the government was threatening mass arrests and sackings. It offered instead a strike on Tuesday and a four-hour stoppage alongside the GSEE private sector union federation on Thursday.

Tuesday's 24-hour general strike did not materialise, with only a handful of schools and hospitals closed. A demonstration organised by ADEDY that evening attracted less than 300 people and saw teachers denounce ADEDY leader Antonis Antonakos as a scab.

Regional conferences of OLME held the same evening voted by a massive 95 percent for strike action. Meanwhile, ADEDY's leaders were in negotiations with New Democracy on how to thwart the planned strike.

On Wednesday, after meeting with the main governing parties, New Democracy and PASOK, OLME's Papachristos announced he would call off the

© World Socialist Web Site

strike if the government withdrew the civil mobilisation orders.

Even this caveat was abandoned. At a 12-hour meeting Thursday of local presidents of OLME and the local secondary school teachers unions (ELME), Papachristos asked the assembled bureaucrats to vote on whether they felt there was enough social support to sustain a strike. Only 18 voted that conditions existed for a strike, nine voted against, and 57 voted blank. The strike was officially called off.

Throughout the events leading up to this betrayal, SYRIZA played the key political role of opposing any confrontation with the government. Papachristos was in negotiations with SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras, who originated the proposal for the strike to be abandoned on the sole proviso of the mobilisation orders being withdrawn.

Tsipras warned the ruling elite that its resort to dictatorial powers was in danger of provoking mass opposition in the working class. “Continual states of emergency do not allow for law and order, but rather their collapse,” he said, offering his services and those of his allies in the trade unions to prevent this from occurring.

In a speech to the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV) Monday, he appealed for collaboration between the employers and the unions in drawing up a new National General Collective Labour Agreement as the only basis for rescuing Greece. SEV President Dimitris Daskalopoulos replied that “SYRIZA’s radicalness is useful and welcome,” since Greece needed radical solutions.

What has taken place over the past week is a warning to workers everywhere of the impossibility of conducting any effective struggle against cuts, closures, job losses and speedup under the leadership of the equally rotten union leaders and fake-left parties in their own countries.

The role of the GSEE, ADEDY and OLME is played by the DGB and its affiliated unions in Germany, the TUC in Britain, the UGT and CC.OO in Spain, and the AFL-CIO in the United States—different acronyms, the same unbroken series of betrayals. And for the pseudo-left groups everywhere, SYRIZA is their main model and political inspiration. They see its electoral successes and those of the Left Party in Germany, gained by mouthing anti-austerity rhetoric while advancing pro-capitalist policies, as proof that they too can aspire to secure places within the state apparatus as political servants of the bourgeoisie.

The continued stifling of the working class by these self-serving petty-bourgeois forces raises grave dangers.

Throughout Europe, the ruling class is turning ever more openly to authoritarian forms of rule, such as the recent lockout imposed on 70,000 teachers by the Danish government. The working class is now involved in a political struggle against the state and the capitalist system it defends. To oppose the ruling class therefore means breaking with the unions and their allies in the pseudo-left groups and building a new socialist leadership. It means developing a mass political and social movement to put an end to the capitalist governments of Europe and form workers’ governments within a United Socialist States of Europe.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site