

Tens of thousands protest closure of public television in Greece

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Tens of thousands of workers demonstrated on Thursday throughout Greece against the closure of the public broadcaster ERT by the Greek government. With ERT workers still occupying the station's main building, people from around the globe are retransmitting the signal of their protest channel on web sites and through radio or satellite.

Conservative Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (ND) ordered the shutdown of the 75-year-old ERT and the immediate dismissal of its 2,700 workers on Tuesday evening without any warning. In a sudden operation on the stroke of midnight, police cut off electricity to the antennas and threatened remaining workers with arrest if they did not leave the building.

Since then, the workers have occupied the main building of the ERT station in the Athens suburb of Agia. They are supported by thousands of workers, who are demonstrating in front of the building to show their solidarity. At noon Thursday, the crowd swelled to well over 10,000.

Demonstrators shouted slogans like "Hands off public broadcasting!" while other held banners reading "Fire Samaras, not ERT workers!"

Thanos Lykourias, 30, an office worker, who earns €800 a month and lives with his mother, told the British daily the *Guardian*: "Samaras can't tell us what to watch or not. This isn't about ERT or workers anymore, it's about democracy and freedom of speech."

An older protester told German public television station ARD: "I came here today, because otherwise this government would dismiss all of us at a certain time."

Smaller demonstrations took place in cities throughout the country. In Thessaloniki thousands gathered in front of the building of ERT3, which is also

occupied by the workers. Bus drivers, railway workers, and seamen struck in solidarity with ERT employees. Some schools were closed, and hospitals worked on emergency staff. Air traffic controllers also laid down their work for two hours. Journalists announced plans to strike until ERT is reopened.

ERT employees are still broadcasting their NET television protest signal over the Internet, reporting on latest developments of strikes and demonstrations. On Thursday, the Geneva-based European Broadcasting Union (EBU) took the signal from a studio in Thessaloniki and transmitted it back to Greek homes over satellite.

The Greek Communist Party (KKE) also offered the channel of its party broadcaster to transmit the signal from the ERT program. Support also came from 50 European TV broadcasters that signed a joint declaration against the shutdown.

Dozens of other web sites are also transmitting the livestream. One supporter of the ERT even registered the web address nerit.gr to stream the program. NERIT is the proposed name for a new public broadcaster the government intends to set up if the ERT workers are defeated—with lower staff and lower wages.

Popular support for ERT workers expresses the widespread social anger and opposition within Greece to deep social cuts that have devastated all sections of the working class. Latest data released yesterday show a new rise of unemployment to 27.4 percent in the first quarter of 2013. More than 850,000 jobs have been wiped out since the beginning of Greece's six-year recession, with average wages falling 35 to 50 percent in the same period.

The ERT workers published a statement pointing to this fact and refuting the denunciation by Samaras that ERT employees are a privileged layer: "Are his charges

of lack of transparency, cronyism and pillage self-criticism? While contract workers were being sacked, ERT's leadership appointed by Samaras was hiring consultants and handing production contracts to cronies, at exorbitant cost and with low viewer ratings. These are the things that we are condemning all this time saying that we are not striking to maintain our privileges but to overturn the marginalizing and degrading of ERT."

Support for ERT is also an expression of workers' opposition to attacks on democratic rights, which are bound up with austerity policies. In the last five months, the state has violently crushed three major strikes.

On Thursday, Samaras openly stated that he closed the ERT not only in order to save money, but also for ideological reasons. "Greece had become a true Jurassic Park, a unique country in the world that saw the survival of dinosaurs with antiquated ideological obsessions that have become extinct everywhere else," Samaras said.

The government not only threatened to jail ERT workers if they did not leave the building, but also tried to stop broadcasting.

The finance ministry wrote in an email to broadcast operators that "any broadcasts carrying ERT's signal are unauthorized ... and can be sanctioned under the law."

In its brutal attacks, the government can rely on the institutions of the European Union, which have dictated the social cuts and other anti-democratic measures. On Thursday evening, Samaras met with senior EU officials to discuss obtaining the next tranche of €3.3 billion in loans. In order to get the money, Samaras has to move ahead with sacking 2,000 workers by the end of the month.

Within the coalition, Samaras and his conservative New Democracy (ND) party were criticized by the two junior partners—the social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left (DIMAR). At a meeting on Thursday all coalition partners decided to have a summit on Monday to clarify the question.

PASOK and DIMAR made clear, however, that they support deep attacks on ERT workers, and have only minor objections to Samaras's policy. "We support a radical restructuring of ERT", Evangelos Venizelos, the chairman of PASOK and former finance minister said,

"but not with blacked-out screens."

The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) is seeking to prevent an explosive development of working class struggles against the government and its attacks. SYRIZA chairman Alexis Tsipras went to the protests, calling for "democracy and social cohesion". In fact, his party refused several opportunities to bring down the austerity government and collaborates closely with the police forces.



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