

Greek workers in fourth general strike of 2013

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Tens of thousands of Greek workers demonstrated in Athens Tuesday, in a 24-hour general strike against the latest austerity programme being pushed through by the Greek coalition government.

The fourth general strike this year, and the latest of dozens of similar events since 2010, was called by ADEDY and GSEE, the public and private sector trade union federations, representing around 2.5 million workers. The strike was preceded Monday night by protests by teachers and education workers against layoffs and school closures. The education workers' action was the latest in a series of strikes and protests by workers facing unemployment, wage cuts and deepening poverty.

Rail workers fighting plans to privatise the network struck, halting train services including the Proastiakos suburban railway. Hospitals operated on an emergency basis as health workers supported the strike. Flights were disrupted after air traffic controllers walked off the job for four hours between noon and 4 p.m. Refuse collectors, bus drivers, bank employees and journalists also supported the strike. The Acropolis, the main tourist attraction in Athens, closed down early.

Buses and trolley buses ran in order for workers to attend the various protest rallies during the day.

Thousands of members of unions affiliated to the ADEDY, GSEE and members of the POE-OTA municipal workers trade union assembled in Klafthmonos Square before marching to Syntagma Square. PAME, the trade union of the Stalinist Communist Party (KKE) organised a separate rally, which also converged on Syntagma.

Workers held up placards with anti-government slogans including, "Fire the troika", "No more sacrifices", and "We are Humans—Not Numbers."

"It feels like Greece is dead and now the vultures are

fighting over its corpse", Eleni Fotopoulou, 58, a retired teacher and mother of two told *Reuters*. "I'm not angry anymore, I am disgusted. We have to fight back."

Members of the municipal police, who face layoffs, also protested in Athens. Other protests and marches were held nationally, including in Thessaloniki and in Chania.

Tax offices and municipal services were shut during the strike. Municipal workers, who struck for 24 hours Monday, have been involved in protests over the last weeks, including workplace occupations. They began a sit-in overnight protest at 6 p.m., also in Syntagma Square.

The New Democracy (ND)-PASOK government is to vote through cuts agreed after the recent review of Greece's austerity measures by the "troika" of the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund. Receipt of £5.8 billion in further loans from the troika requires the government to pass the legislation, which will enforce the firing of tens of thousands of public sector workers, including teachers, hospital staff and municipal workers.

According to Bloomberg, a European Union official said that senior euro-area financial officials are to hold a discussion July 24 to determine whether Greece qualifies for further loans from the €240 billion (\$314 billion) overall loan agreement.

The omnibus legislation, which the troika specified had to become law by July 19, contains 109 articles including privatisations, health sector spending and taxation changes. The legislation centres on the firing of 4,000 state employees this year, including teachers, broadcasting workers, public building caretakers and municipal police officers. A further 15,000 are to be sacked by the end of 2014 and 25,000 placed in a

mobility scheme (4,200 of these by the end of July and 12,500 transfers this year).

Those being dumped into the scheme include 1,000 hospital staff—a move that will wreak further havoc on already devastated public health provision. The scheme is a euphemism for firing workers. They will have an eight-month period on 75 percent of their salaries. After that period, they are forced to accept any job offered to them, or, if no place is available for them in another part of the public sector, as is almost certain, they will be made redundant.

The *Financial Times* welcomed the troika/government proposals, declaring this week, “Greece’s civil service cull heralds break with the past.”

Stating that the “game was up” for public sector workers, the *FT* said, “While dismissals this year will amount to less than one percent of the civil service payroll, they send a message that a longstanding taboo on firing public sector workers has been broken, according to Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the newly appointed minister for public administration, who worked for the consultants McKinsey before entering politics.”

Even these measures are not enough, with the *FT* complaining, “Even though jobs for life are no longer guaranteed, procedures for sacking can be long drawn-out. About 6,000 state employees whose temporary contracts have ended, including janitors, cleaners and gardeners, are being paid in full while they contest their dismissal in the courts. The government has agreed to settle all such disputes this year.”

The latest unemployment figures released last week reveal that alongside the 1.3 million jobless, another 3.3 million are “economically inactive”. In April 2008, just before the global economic crisis and the onset of savage attacks on the living standards of the Greek people began, 380,775 people were registered unemployed. In just five years almost a million people have been added to the unemployment rolls.

On the mood among many workers and young people with no future, the *Guardian*’s Greece correspondent Helena Smith commented, “[T]here are growing signs that Greece is reaching a tipping point. At a time when unemployment is nudging 27 percent the firing of some 25,000 civil servants—because no matter what language the dismissals are cloaked in that is what it amounts to—are simply seen as a demand too far.”

As conditions of life worsen for the majority of Greeks, the trade unions called yet another strike to allow workers to vent their anger. As previously, they utilised the occasion to sow illusions that the ruling hated big business parties can be pressured into altering their course. Vasilis Polymeropoulos, the ADEDY vice president, said, “We urge MPs not to vote for the bill, because it would be a tragic mistake.”

Nikos Kioutsoukis, general secretary of the GSEE union federation, commented, “The dilemma facing MPs is whether to go along with the [troika] memorandums or with the people.”

The position of the unions, who have facilitated one austerity programme after another with a series of futile, token stoppages, was summed up by Costas Askounis, the leader of the protesting Central Union of Municipalities. Stating, “We are not opposed to reform”, he did not raise any concern for the fate of millions of workers who have been cast into poverty or the 64 percent of young people who are now unemployed. Instead, he added, “What we do oppose is abolishing entire institutions like the municipal police and personnel to guard state schools.”

The pseudo-left party SYRIZA, the Coalition of the Radical Left, which acts as the self-declared “loyal opposition” to the government, utilised the protests Tuesday to carry out a stunt. A delegation of the party’s MPs came out of the parliament building to hang a banner reading, “Let’s fire the government. No lay-offs in the state and private sector.”



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