On eve of Merkel visit, massive anti-austerity strike in Greece

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Hundreds of thousands of Greek workers took part in a 24-hour general strike Wednesday, the first public expression this year of the mass opposition to the austerity policies and mass unemployment imposed under the dictates of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

With this “troika” calling the shots, the right-wing government of Premier Antonis Samaras has slashed public spending to the point where Greece has now posted a “primary” budget surplus—that is, a surplus if debt repayment and interest are excluded—of 2.5 percent of GDP. The consequences for Greek workers have been horrific: unemployment at 27.5 percent, rising to 57 percent for young people; cuts in wages averaging 30 percent or more; the gutting of public services such as health care.

On the eve of the general strike, a free community clinic in Athens issued an appeal to the government against the cutoff of medication for uninsured patients with dangerous contagious diseases. The Metropolitan Community Clinic at Elliniko called the decision of the Health Ministry to cut off medicine for eight hepatitis B and C sufferers an “astonishingly irresponsible policy.” The clinic added, “Patients with serious and contagious diseases cannot be ignored.”

Only a week ago, the Greek parliament pushed through a new package of regressive measures, including another 4,000 public-sector job cuts, reductions in benefits for the unemployed, cuts in pensions, and the elimination of regulations to open up many types of small business, such as pharmacies, gas stations, bakeries and dairies, to ruinous competition by big corporations. The parliament also pledged to adopt a reform of the labor code by the end of 2014 that will drastically curb the right to strike.

The general strike takes place on the eve of two events that symbolize the devastation of Greece by the global financial aristocracy. On Thursday, the country is to return to the international capital markets, selling its first government bonds since it plunged into financial crisis in 2010. On Friday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a key enforcer of austerity policies throughout Europe, arrives in Athens for talks with Prime Minister Samaras.

The one-day general strike targeted most public transport, including ferries to Greece’s numerous islands, buses and trains, although the Athens subway was only sporadically affected. Schools were shut throughout the country, as were most courts and other government offices. Pharmacies, hospitals and clinics were closed except for medical emergencies.

The two main union confederations, the private-sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public-sector Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), called a protest march in central Athens, which was attended by an estimated 6,000 workers, a tiny fraction of the number who joined the strike. A separate rally called by the Communist Party-controlled union federation PAME drew only a few hundred.

The union bureaucracies have been discredited by their collaboration in implementing the austerity policies of the past five years. The two main union confederations are tied to the social democratic PASOK party, which imposed ruthless cuts in jobs and spending when it controlled the majority in parliament (2009-2012), and continued in that role as a junior partner in the Samaras government (2012 to the present).

PASOK leader Evangelos Venizelos is deputy prime minister and foreign minister in the Samaras government.

As the Greek economy has descended into a depression worse than any in memory, the GSEE and ADEDY have limited their response to a series of toothless one-day and two-day strikes. These strikes have shown the potential power of the working class, but have been used to let off steam, obscure the role of the unions in supporting the cuts, and allow the attacks on jobs, living standards and social conditions to go forward unaffected.

Wednesday's strike is no different. Even while the workers were striking and marching, the minister of administrative reform, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, told Vima FM that it was time to end the guarantee of jobs for life for public-sector workers. The Greek constitution effectively forbids firing public workers except for disciplinary reasons. "Society is mature enough to discuss this," Mitsotakis said.

Also Wednesday, the head of the agency charged with selling off government property to meet the demands of the "troika" for privatization said that a portfolio of as much as 500 million euros ($689 million) would be put on the auction block by the end of this year. Andreas Taprantzis, executive director of the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund, said the agency had sold off 5 billion euros in property, including 1.8 billion euros in real estate, over the past 14 months, including ports, airports, land and other assets.

Three giant European banks—UBS, Deutsche Bank and BNP Paribas—are overseeing the sell-off. "There has been a huge shift in sentiment and, after sniffing around for quite a while, investors are now anxious to dig up Greek opportunities," Taprantzis told Bloomberg News. "Look how stocks have performed." The Athens Stock Exchange has jumped 175 percent since reaching a 22-year low in June 2012.

The stark contrast between the mass suffering of the general population and the self-enrichment of the financial elite was underscored by the announcement that Greece would return to the international capital markets the day after the general strike. The Samaras government touted its ability to sell 2.5 billion euros in bonds at a projected 5 percent interest rate as proof that its policies were succeeding.

But even the *New York Times*, which backs the austerity policies, was compelled to admit that "the gulf between financial optimism and the desperation of millions of unemployed Greeks and tens of millions of jobless people elsewhere in the euro zone and the broader European Union is proving difficult to bridge."

In reality, the bond sale is a maneuver by Samaras and his European backers to give a political boost to the right-wing government and enable it to get through the municipal and European Parliament elections set for May 25 without suffering a crushing political defeat.

A commentary in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Wednesday warned: "The government majority under the conservative Greek prime minister, Antonis Samaras, has fallen to 2 MPs. If his party loses at the local or Euro elections in May, this might lead to early parliamentary elections, which subsequently might lead to political instability and further crisis, which would also be a threat to the entire euro zone."

The newspaper observed, "At this point, according to the troika's report, Greece will probably need a new loan of 16 to 17 billion euros until 2016, which will lead to a new bailout package. European politicians must be sincere and explain to the Greeks that their country will probably need a new bailout package. Angela Merkel's visit to Samaras on April 11 might be a good opportunity for that."

Any new bailout would be for the purpose of ensuring that Greece continues to repay its creditors: the funds will be recycled back to the European Central Bank and the major international banks and bondholders, while the austerity clampdown is tightened even further on the working people.

The response of the main parliamentary opposition party, the pseudo-left SYRIZA coalition, was to criticize the decision to sell bonds because it would "increase public debt" and give Greece the image of a country that was obliged to borrow.

In the run-up to the elections, party leader Alexis Tsipras has repeatedly declared that a SYRIZA government would repay Greece's debts to the billionaires and the European Central Bank, making payments while "renegotiating" the terms. The financial oligarchy would have the whip hand in any such process, as SYRIZA is committed to remaining within the euro zone and the European Union, thus enforcing the subordination of the Greek population to the demands of finance capital.