

Greek public building cleaners defy police repression, demand reinstatement

Robert Stevens
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Laid-off public building cleaners in Greece continued their campaign to demand reinstatement with a protest Thursday outside the headquarters of the governing New Democracy party.

Since being entered into the “labour mobility scheme,” designed to fire public sector staff, the workers have protested daily outside the Finance Ministry. Last week, riot police brutally attacked demonstrators.

During Thursday’s protest, cleaners chanted slogans and tied nooses around their necks in a symbolic gesture to protest their dismissals. *Kathemerini* reported that the workers “briefly blocked the entrance to the offices of the conservative party.”

Last autumn, the government placed the 465 female workers, who had been mainly employed at tax offices nationwide for as little as €500 a month, onto the mobility scheme. Under the programme, workers receive a reduced salary for eight months. In mid-May, the payments ended, and since no other public sector jobs were made available, they were laid off May 18.

The work previously carried out by the laid-off workers is now being done by private companies for a third of the cost, according to media reports.

Since 2010, successive Greek governments have wiped out a total of 161,000 public sector jobs. The mobility scheme is part of the New Democracy/PASOK regime’s austerity programme, which came into operation last year, initially targeting 25,000 civil servants. Another 15,000 public-sector workers are still to be fired in accordance with the government’s agreement with the European Union (EU)-led “Troika”. Some 11,000 of these workers are to be laid off this year.

On May 22, several dozen of the cleaners occupied the Finance Ministry in the capital of Athens. Entering

the front entrance, some padlocked the doors to the ministry from within, while co-workers sat down in front of the building. A large contingent of riot police then arrived at the scene and threatened the workers unless they vacated the building.

The protest came after the Council of State court ruled on May 16 that the government had illegally dismissed the workers. The court upheld an appeal by 397 of the women who charged they had been illegally placed into the mobility scheme. The Athens court ruled that the Finance Ministry should rehire the laid-off workers, saying the low wages received by the workers did not appreciably add to budget savings.

The court reasoned that, as the majority of the cleaners were 45-60 years old, they had virtually no chance of obtaining further employment in a country with 27 percent unemployment. One of the workers cited in media reports is 53 years old and has been employed at the Finance Ministry as a cleaner for 22 years.

The Finance Ministry refused to accept the Council of State’s ruling. On May 21, Haris Theocharis, then the head of public revenues, said the government would appeal the decision. One cleaner cited on the *keptalkinggreece* web site said, “We were told we would not be hired again”.

On June 12, the Supreme Court overturned the Council of State’s decision and put on hold the decision to rehire the workforce. According to *To Vima*, the Supreme Court “neglected to include the rationale behind its decision in the two-page court order decision that it issued at noon, despite being legally obligated to do so in court order suspensions.”

The newspaper added, “The Ministry has claimed that the Athens court had no jurisdiction to rule on the case, arguing that it was a case to be handled by

administrative courts, while the abolition of their position was in the public interest, since the reduction of the public sector improves finances.”

A final legal decision on the fate of the cleaners is to be made in September.

Commenting on the dispute, Aristides Hatzis, a professor of legal theory at the University of Athens, told the *New York Times*, “The government is in a state of emergency, so it is violating the Constitution”.

On the day of the Supreme Court’s ruling, about 50 cleaners continued their daily protest outside the Finance Ministry. Despite the protest being entirely peaceful, riot police were called in to attack the workers. Two of the protesters were hospitalised with leg injuries, and a photojournalist was also injured.

YouTube video footage shows one of the riot police brutally striking one of the workers over the head with his fist covered by an iron-knuckled glove. The worker, 60-year-old Fotini Nikitara, subsequently told a TV station, “I felt I was hit by iron. I saw some stars”.

A close-up shot of one of the riot police wearing an iron-knuckled glove can be viewed here.



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