

Dock workers at Piraeus Port, Greece end strike

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Around 150 workers went on strike at the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) facilities at the port of Piraeus, early on Friday, July 18. Among their demands were an end to 16-hour shifts, an increase in pay and settlement of unpaid wages due, breaks during shifts, an increase in manning levels at bridge cranes and for worker accidents to be officially recorded.

Due to last until Monday, it was ended the following day after management reportedly agreed to some of the strikers' demands. Cosco has been in charge of half of the port of Piraeus since 2009 after it acquired the management rights as part of a 35-year lease worth €500 million.

Cosco's Piraeus facilities are notorious for their sweatshop working conditions with accidents being a common occurrence. In 2011, a worker interviewed by US radio broadcaster NPR explained, "Workers were told by supervisors to urinate into the sea, rather than taking toilet breaks. Those operating straddle carriers (vehicles that stack containers) had to take cups up into their cabs to urinate into, and he says they were not given breaks, either, despite the clear dangers of operating at such a height for so long."

Last week's strike was the first since Cosco's takeover. It comes one month after Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Greece where he signed a series of shipping, trade and energy deals with the government worth €3.4 billion.

As part of the visit, Li and Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras visited Cosco's site for a photo-op, underscoring the fact that its Piraeus operation is to be the blueprint for all subsequent investments by China in Greece. Such an expansion would entrench sweatshop-style conditions in the country, setting a precedent for the rest of Europe.

According to the Greek daily *Imerisia*, the dispute began "when the night shift workers refused to leave the terminal with the morning shift workers remaining

outside. It was decided on-the-spot to carry out work stoppages in demand for better working conditions. Shortly afterwards, an informal assembly was convened where it was decided to continue strike action until Monday with the formation of a union afterwards. At that point, company representatives arrived and began negotiations that lasted late into Friday night, under the gaze of riot police that had also arrived there."

The presence of riot police at every labour dispute is now a permanent feature in Greece. It is testament to the erosion of democratic norms in the country since the first austerity package was signed with the European Union, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund—commonly referred to as the Troika. Last month, riot police brutally attacked a protest held outside the Finance Ministry by cleaners demanding their reinstatement after being placed in the government's "labour mobility scheme." Two protesters were reportedly hospitalised with leg injuries as a result.

Sections of the Greek press, including the pseudo-left SYRIZA's *Avgi* and the Greek Communist Party's (KKE) online news site 902.gr, have been quick to hail the strike settlement as "a victory for the workers". By all accounts, however, the measures proposed by Cosco in response to the strikers' demands are essentially cosmetic in nature, and do nothing to address conditions at the site.

For instance, Cosco agreed to give all dock workers "hazardous and unhealthy" job status. In theory, this should grant them certain privileges under Greek law. In practice, such a label is a dead letter if nothing is done to address the underlying working conditions.

Cosco also agreed to have a Red Cross team on site full-time in order to assess injuries to decide whether an ambulance is needed (currently injured workers are transported to hospital in private cars). This seeks only to better manage accidents rather than prevent them.

Meanwhile, no measures have been taken to reduce the

16-hour shifts and the issue of pay has been deferred as part of a consultation process that was due to start on Monday. As regards manning level of bridge cranes—a common cause of accidents—Cosco has reportedly agreed to increase this from three employees to a minimum of four, with an extra worker added at management’s discretion if there is extra workload. Hence, the five-worker level demanded by the strikers is subordinated to commercial considerations, which was what led to the cutting of manning levels in the first place.

Cosco’s stance underscores that its profitability is directly linked to the extreme exploitation of the workers at the site. Managing Director of the Pireaus operation Captain Fu Cheng Qiu alluded to this fact in an interview last month when he said: “No other country in Europe offers such potential.”

Although the decision to end the strike was reportedly agreed unanimously, it is unclear whether the trade union bureaucracy intervened in some way and to what extent the presence of riot police at the site influenced the decision.

While the dock workers union OMYLE has no official presence in Cosco’s facilities there were reports that its officials descended on the site after the strike was called in supposed solidarity.

In a statement, OLYME President Giorgos Georgakopoulos said that “From the first moment OMYLE had stressed the necessity of the presence of a trade union at the terminal. The attack on labour rights and the banning of unionisation cannot cover up ad infinitum the medieval working conditions at Cosco.”

In actual fact, OMYLE played a crucial role in facilitating the leasing of half of Piraeus Port to Cosco. After a series of strikes in the first half of October 2009 by Pireaus’ dock workers in protest against the takeover, OMYLE called off any future strike action after a meeting with Louka Katseli, finance minister in George Papandreou’s social democratic PASOK government. There followed a two-week “consultation period”, during which the union refrained from strike action, that concluded with Cosco’s takeover in November.

SYRIZA also postured as defenders of the workers at Cosco’s facilities. In a statement Thodoris Dritsas, a SYRIZA MP for the Pireaus A constituency, said, “The strike is justified and the demands are fundamental in terms of labour justice and security.” This conceals that SYRIZA is complicit in maintaining the status quo in the port of Pireaus. For instance, while SYRIZA was critical of Samaras’ photo-op at Cosco’s facilities last month, the

party was characteristically silent on the atrocious working conditions there.

Furthermore, since 2012 SYRIZA has openly collaborated with Louka Katseli the chief government official that oversaw the lease agreement with Cosco in 2009. Katseli left PASOK in 2012 to form her own party “Social Agreement”, which ran on a common ticket with SYRIZA in the June 2012 General Elections and more recently in this year’s European elections. Katseli was also invited to attend SYRIZA’s founding conference last year where she spoke.

For its part, the KKE has taken the well-worn path of attempting to steer Cosco’s workers into the straitjacket of the trade union bureaucracy. In a statement, its Trade Union faction All Workers Militant Front (PAME) called “on trade union organisations to support the struggle waged by Cosco’s workers.”

The private-sector union confederation GSEE also offered its token support, stating that it would “use all the legal means at its disposal in order to protect the right of workers to unionise and for all their just demands to be met.” This is the same GSEE that earlier this year signed a collective bargaining agreement with the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV), which set the minimum monthly wage at the paltry levels of €586 for those aged 25 years and above, and €511 for under-25s.

GSEE, along with public sector confederation ADEDY, have also been instrumental in facilitating the passage of all austerity measures in the last five years, by calling limited 24-hour general strikes, which allow the passage of the measures while workers let off steam.



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