

Greek health workers, journalists, pensioners strike against austerity

Robert Stevens
21 May 2015

Thousands of doctors, nurses and ambulance staff from Greece's state-run hospitals and health centres began a 24-hour strike Wednesday.

The Federation of Public Hospital Employees (POEDIN) called the strike to protest the gutting of health care since the onset of mass austerity in 2010. Among the demands of the workers are the employment of more staff and the payment of unpaid wages. POEDIN said Greece's national health service was "out of control due to underfunding and understaffing."

According to POEDIN, the Syriza-led government's ongoing negotiations with its creditors were not creating "the requirements to solve accumulated problems, and the situation is heading to a non-manageable level."

During the stoppage hospitals were only kept open with the assistance of emergency staff. The strike was supported by members of the Greek Union of Hospital Doctors (EINAP). The Federation of Greek Hospital Doctors (OENGE) also supported the strike, releasing a statement which stated that public hospitals are in a state of "economic asphyxiation". The doctors are requesting an increase in hospital funding to €2 billion a year from the current level of €1.4 billion "to solve the problem of lack of materials and medicine."

The Civil Servant's Confederation (ADEDY), Greece's main public sector trade union federation, issued a statement supporting the strike and said its members would be striking nationwide Wednesday. It organised a protest outside the Ministry of Health in Athens for 12:30pm. Some 500 striking medical workers, supported by pensioners protesting cuts to social security and health care, took part.

An ADEDY statement called for "free public health services for everyone, adequate staffing and funding of

the national health system (ESY), abolition of the memorandum policies that led to the shrinkage and privatisation of the system, the payment of arrears, and the recovery of wage losses."

Journalists belonging to the Athens association ESIEA called a six-hour strike from 11:00am to allow them to take part in a general assembly being held by the union. Among the newspapers hit was the daily *Proto Thema*, which provided no services in Greek or English during the period.

Public health care provision has been slashed to the bone, with the result that three million Greeks, around a quarter of the population, have no health insurance and no right to receive state-funded health care. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), health spending per head in Greece dropped by 25 percent between 2009 and 2012, and has not improved since. Just €11 billion a year (5 percent of GDP) goes to health care.

The human cost has been staggering. Unprecedented cuts have destroyed an advanced public health care system built up over decades. Two health care trade unions issued figures in September 2014 which show that 850 medical clinics have been closed, 10,000 beds eliminated and 30,000 front-line positions removed. Eleven hospitals have closed since the beginning of the crisis. Wednesday's strike was not the first called since the pseudo-left Syriza came to office, with port workers taking action on May 6 to oppose privatisation. Employees at the now privately-owned Hellenic Petroleum refinery struck on May 9, following an explosion that injured six workers the previous day.

However, it was the first national stoppage called by either of the two federations. This development is evidence that the trade union bureaucracy are well aware of the mass anger that is brewing against their

partners in the Syriza government.

Syriza was elected on a mandate to oppose austerity, but has instead pledged to impose further attacks on the working class. The role of the unions, who fear that opposition will spiral out of control and threaten Syriza's rule, is to do everything to deaden such a movement.

Syriza is seeking to finalise, in the face of growing anger at systemic and worsening mass poverty, an agreement for a continuation of austerity with the troika of the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund.

The government is committed to paying back every cent of the more than €300 billion in debt owed by the Greek state. In the last four months alone it has paid back more than €13 billion—several billion euros more than Greece's entire annual public health service budget! It is estimated that the country's public hospitals require an immediate injection of €600 million to keep them functioning. Syriza handed over more than this amount (€750 million) in a single payment to the IMF on May 12.

In order to demonstrate to the troika it could run a budget surplus, Syriza has slashed public spending in the first three months of the year. The *Financial Times* noted that as a result, "Healthcare spending in particular has taken a hit. A line item for 'cover of hospital deficit', for example, has seen only €43m in spending thus far..."

ADEDY, its affiliated unions and the GSEE private sector union federation played a critical role over the last five years, working with successive governments as one savage austerity programme after another was imposed. More than 30 general strikes were called, with the specific purpose of using them to allow the anger of workers to be dissipated by ineffective protests lasting mostly for just 24 hours. Both ADEDY and the GSEE were previously dominated by representatives of the social democratic PASOK movement. PASOK is now widely reviled due to its role in imposing austerity with the government of George Papandreou in 2009 and its participation in successive governments that deepened attacks on the living standards of millions. In January's election it was virtually wiped out, winning just 4.6 percent of the vote.

As a result, many of those in the trade union federations previously loyal to PASOK have decamped

to Syriza.

Syriza will utilise the unions to play the same role as the policemen of the working class that they did for the PASOK/New Democracy governments. In February Alternate Minister for Administrative Reform George Katrougalos said of the government's plans to "restructure," i.e. cut, the civil service, that "their union (ADEDY) has a different opinion and I invited them to tell them that for me they are my natural partners and that I will not administrate without their cooperation, but at the end I will be the one that will legislate."

Spyros Papaspyros, a leading figure within ADEDY and formerly a PASOK supporter, said prior to Syriza's election, "We will be in the next government with alliances and ambitions."

Bitter experience, in Greece and internationally, proves that the trade unions only exist to facilitate, with government of all political colourations, and big business, the imposition of brutal cuts. The re-emergence of workers struggles in Greece, within months of Syriza's election, sharply raises the necessity for the adoption of a socialist perspective and a movement of the working class independent of the trade unions and the political establishment.



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