

Second one-day protest strike hits pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece

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Less than a month after the November 12 protest strike, workers in Greece again struck to protest austerity measures being imposed by the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras.

Working closely with the European Union (EU), Tsipras is now pushing for deep new cuts to pensions and to eliminate protections from eviction for families in arrears on their mortgages.

Transport workers on the state railways and the Athens subway, trams and airport, as well as workers in various parts of the country’s strategic ports and shipping industries, walked off the job in protest. Oil terminals, merchant shipping facilities, and ferries in cities across Greece, including in Athens and the country’s second city, Thessaloniki, were shut down due to the strike.

They were joined by public sector workers, including schoolteachers, university staff and workers at hospitals, which operated emergency services only with skeleton staffs.

Lawyers in Athens also refused to perform their duties, in protest at pension cuts and upcoming changes in the Civil Procedure Code.

Workers stayed away, however, from protest marches called by Greece’s trade union federations, all of whom have close political ties with the pro-austerity Syriza government. About 9,000 people attended a rally on Athens’ Omonia Square called by the All-Workers Militant Front (PAME), a minority trade union federation close to the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE).

Only 8,000 attended another rally by both the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the Civil Servants’ Confederation (ADEDY). These unions—which are both historically tied to the social-

democratic Pasok party, which has collapsed due to its role in imposing unpopular austerity measures between 2009 and 2012—together represent around 2.5 million workers.

The wide participation in the strike by sections of the workforce called out by corresponding trade unions testify to the broad opposition to Syriza’s reactionary policies in the working class. At the same time, the feeble participation in the marches point to deep popular disaffection with Greece’s union bureaucracies, after nearly six years of continuous assaults on wages and living standards carried out by the EU and successive Greek governments since 2010.

There is a broad sense that these protests offer no way forward for working people, despite the ever more desperate social crisis in Greece. This points to critical political and strategic issues facing workers in Greece and internationally, and the need for a fundamental break by the working class with anti-working class parties such as Syriza.

In the early stages of the Greek debt crisis, trade unions across Europe claimed that one-day national strikes and protest actions carried out under their control would pressure the ruling classes to shift, or at least slow down, their social attacks. At the same time, the unions cultivated relations with middle-class parties such as Syriza, who postured as “radical left” organizations opposed to austerity.

Since 2010, however, dozens of one-day protest strikes held by the GSEE, ADEDY, and PAME did nothing to prevent a catastrophic collapse in living standards in Greece, 30 to 40 percent wage cuts, the elimination of universal health care, and the emergence of mass unemployment and hunger.

Above all, the experience of the coming to power of Syriza this year demonstrated the utter treachery of the

entire privileged middle-class layer that controlled and directed these protests, and which have proved to be determined supporters of austerity and capitalism. Tsipras trampled first its January election promise to end the EU austerity Memorandum, then a 61 percent “no” vote in a July referendum on austerity. Having barely won reelection in a September election, it is pressing ahead with more brutal cuts.

In a statement, “The Political Lessons of Syriza’s Betrayal in Greece,” the International Committee of the Fourth International underscored how the working class could not defend itself by pressuring capitalist governments or seeking to elect new ones. It explained:

“The only way forward is through a genuinely revolutionary policy, mobilizing the working class in Greece and internationally in struggle. It requires a direct assault on the capitalist class, the confiscation of their wealth, the seizure of the major banks and productive forces, in order to place them under the democratic control of working people, and the creation of workers states across Europe and the world. Such struggles require the building of Marxist parties to offer political leadership to the working class, in ruthless struggle against parties like Syriza.”

Protests such as yesterday’s one-day protests are in the final analysis an attempt by Syriza and the union bureaucracies around it to prevent the emergence of an independent movement of the working class against their own reactionary policies.

While they seek to exploit working-class discontent, they are in the final analysis defensive moves by the capitalist political establishment. The previous November 12 one-day protest strike provoked widespread distrust, after the Syriza government itself endorsed the strike ostensibly called against its own policies.

Now, Syriza is maneuvering with the rest of the Greek political establishment, as each bourgeois party cynically tries to implement EU cuts overwhelmingly rejected by the Greek people, while unloading blame for the cuts on its rivals.

Syriza has already raised the retirement age, increased retirees’ mandatory health care contribution payments, and scrapped most early retirement benefits, in order to get access to EU bailout funding. However, the EU is pressing Athens to impose deeper cuts this month, including merging various pension funds and

slashing supplementary pensions.

On Saturday, Tsipras met with parliamentary opposition parties, asking them to form a joint committee with Syriza to prepare more detailed proposals for how to implement the austerity measures they have agreed upon.

Bank of Greece Governor Yannis Stournaras demanded that the parliamentary parties come together to put the final touches on the austerity measures they have agreed upon. “There has been a high degree of consensus when the [EU austerity] deal was voted in by a big parliamentary majority last July,” Stournaras said Sunday. “It should be safeguarded to secure political stability,” he added.

“We will do the utmost to secure pensions without further painful cuts...and, at the same time, we will try to make the system viable again by proposing an entirely new system,” Tsipras said on Tuesday, without saying what measures he had in mind.



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