

Mass protests against pension cuts in Greece

Christoph Dreier
23 January 2016

In Greece, an increasing number of professional groups are protesting against the planned pension cuts of the Syriza government. Sailors are striking the ferry service, doctors and lawyers have demonstrated on Syntagma Square and angry farmers have repeatedly paralyzed major public transport hubs for days.

The protests by farmers have expanded considerably. Up to 6,000 tractors have been parked on the fringes of major roads. Last Wednesday, Thursday and Friday farmers drove their vehicles for a few hours onto main roads, thus blocking traffic. Some 1,300 tractors have been parked, ready for action, in Promachone on the border with Bulgaria.

On Wednesday about 2,000 farmers demonstrated in front of the regional administration in Komotini, during a visit by Agriculture Minister Vangelis Apostolou. They demanded a meeting with the minister, but he declined. Instead, police attacked the protesters with tear gas.

The protests of farmers are marked by anger and despair. The *Guardian* spoke with one of the protesting farmers, who had tried in November to storm the Greek parliament, as Syriza announced their plans for pension cuts. He already has problems providing for his three children, he said. In September he had voted for Syriza because he thought the party was a new hope for the country. "Now I don't want to hear anymore from them", he said.

Another farmer denounced all the parties, saying, "If the politicians continue to drive us in the corner and humiliate us, we go to Athens and burn them down." Talks between trade unionists and Labour Minister Giorgos Katroungalos remained inconclusive on Friday and the farmers have announced they will continue their protests.

On Wednesday and Thursday sailors took strike action and virtually paralyzed the entire ferry service. On Thursday, the sailors marched to the Ministry of

Shipping, where employees also are on strike. The sailors' trade union PNO announced the next 48-hour strike for January 27-28.

Last weekend, public sector unions and private sector workers held a demonstration in front of the Greek parliament, which was attended by about 5,000 people.

In addition to the farmers, workers and sailors, doctors, lawyers, pharmacists and other self-employed persons took to the streets to demonstrate against the pension reform. About 4,000, mostly well-dressed persons gathered in the Syntagma Square.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has made clear he is determined to enforce the brutal pension reform irrespective of public protest. At the economic forum in Davos he assured his backers that he would carry out his planned reforms to the letter.

The plans involve future cuts in pensions of up to 30 percent. The only protection afforded is to a minimum pension of €384. In addition, contributions to the pension fund are to be raised significantly. In future, farmers will have to pay 20 percent instead of 7 percent of their income. Social Security payments are expected to increase for both employers and employees. Some self-employed workers must reckon with contribution increases of more than 100 percent.

The massive cuts in pensions are a fundamental attack on the living conditions of millions of Greeks. Many families, plagued by unemployment, already depend on the already meagre pensions. The official unemployment rate continues to be extremely high, at 24 percent.

The latest reform is the 12th cut to pensions in Greece since 2010. Average pensions have declined during this period from €1,355 to €833 per month today.

In return for new cuts Greece is to receive a small tranche of loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU) of €5.7 billion. However, it is not yet certain whether the banks

consider the planned measures as adequate or if they will demand even deeper cuts.

At the meeting in Davos investor representatives made clear that the cuts to pensions were insufficient and that further attacks should be made on current retirees.

At the fringes of the meeting Tsipras met on Thursday with IMF chief Christine Lagarde. The meeting was “cordial”, according to the Greek side. Lagarde had stressed that Greece still had to make additional cuts before there could be any talk of debt reduction.

There is no doubt that the Syriza government will implement any and all the demands of the representatives of the EU and IMF. It has made that abundantly clear in the past. Since its re-election in September it has implemented fresh cuts and privatisation in cycles of one to two weeks, which have been met with strong resistance in the population.

In September the new government increased VAT on many basic goods and thus hit the poorest of the poor. In October, parliament decided to increase the retirement age to 67 years, and carried out its own first pension cuts.

On November 6, more taxes were increased. Farmers now have to pay €200 instead of €66 per ton for diesel taxes. On November 19, the Syriza government allowed the seizure of indebted residential buildings in order to improve the finances of the banks.

On December 6, the government majority finally decided the 2016 budget in parliament, involving cuts of €5.7 billion. In the middle of the same month it gave a green light for the privatisation of regional airports to be carried out by the German company Fraport.

This balance sheet speaks for itself and now Syriza is preparing to implement its pension cuts despite widespread opposition. In so doing it is supported by the major trade union federations, the ADEDY and GSEE, which are doing everything in their power to render the massive protests harmless for the government.

For February 4, the federations have announced a “general strike”. Such actions are a weapon in the arsenal of the unions to allow workers to let off steam while effectively demobilising them. They are the permanent accompaniment to the cuts orgies.

The ADEDY and GSEE functionaries were recruited

from the ruling parties New Democracy (ND) and PASOK, and supported their policies. Today, they maintain close links with Syriza and play the same supporting role.

The only way to dismiss the EU diktat is an unsparing struggle against the programme and practice of Syriza, the unions and their pseudo-left appendages.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact