

Greek workers stage 24-hour strike against Syriza government austerity

John Vassilopoulos
9 December 2016

Greek workers struck Thursday in a one-day strike against plans by the Syriza-led coalition government to impose yet deeper attacks on living standards and increase taxes on the working class.

The strike was called by the Adedy public sector trade union and the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), which covers the private sector. The stoppage affected public transport, with no metro or suburban services in the capital, Athens. National rail services were cancelled as rail operator Trainose was forced to halt its service.

State-run schools and universities were closed. Public health workers also supported the strike, with hospitals kept open with emergency staff only. Bank workers took part.

On Wednesday, journalists had held a 24-hour strike, pulling all television and radio news broadcasts off the air. This meant that no newspapers were published Thursday and news websites were not updated until Thursday morning. The journalists were protesting social security cuts that will affect pension funds. Due to Greece's economic crisis, and a general fall in newspaper sales globally, many journalists have been unpaid for months, despite continuing to work.

Seamen have also been striking throughout this week in protest against proposed tax hikes on their income, bringing passenger and cargo lines to a standstill.

Around 7,000 people protested in several demonstrations in Athens, with the main one beginning at Pedion tou Areos Square and ending at Syntagma Square, in front of the parliament building. Some of the banners on the march read, "We won't compromise!" and "We want jobs." One of the factory workers at the demonstration, Nikos Spanopoulos, told the media, "This leftist government was elected to make things better, but from what I see...they are going to take

everything including our underwear."

Speaking to Euronews, another participant said, "There is depression in almost every family," adding, "There are huge difficulties not only economically but in the social sphere as well." A pensioner said, "Our pensions have been cut by at least 40 percent. People have no money to pay more taxes. They have worked hard and paid a lot in social security contributions. It was all taken from them in advance."

PAME, the trade union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), held a separate demonstration in Athens.

Protests were held nationwide, including around 5,000 who demonstrated in Greece's second city, Thessaloniki. No public transport ran in the city.

Since mass austerity began in Greece in 2009, the population has lost almost a third of their income. Unemployment remains above 23 percent (1.1 million people) with youth unemployment at more than 46 percent.

In calling the 24-hour general strike, the aim of the union federations was to allow Greek workers to let off steam while the barrage of austerity measures continues unabated. There is a sense, however, that this well-worn tactic, which has been employed countless times since the first bailout package was signed in 2010, has run its course. In an effort to maintain its stranglehold over the working class and to cover its own complicity in facilitating the imposition of austerity during the last six years, the bureaucracy adopted a more combative tone in the run-up to this strike. In its statement, Adedy declared the need for "a unified all-worker escalation of strikes, demonstrations and occupations in a common struggle with young people and the suffering sections of the middle class."

The on-going implementation of austerity measures

by the government has also sparked a crisis within Syriza, with nine out of ten voters now expressing dissatisfaction with the pseudo-left party. In an attempt to offset this hostility, the strike was supported by Syriza's "Labour Policy Department," which issued a statement railing against "neoliberal policies, which are dismantling labour rights" and calling "on workers, the unemployed and young people to dynamically participate in the strike" directed against their own party!

The strike took place just days after a meeting of European Union (EU) finance ministers, at which Greece had sought reductions in the 3.5 percent primary surplus target that it is expected to run after 2018, and some debt relief. German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble responded by threatening Athens that if it wished to remain in the euro, it would have to deepen its austerity agenda. Debt forgiveness would "not help Greece," he said. "Athens must finally carry out the necessary reforms. If Greece wants to stay in the euro, there is no way past that—completely independently of the debt level."

For its part, the International Monetary Fund considers the 3.5 percent target as unrealistic and is in favour of some debt relief—but only in return for an extra €4.2 billion in austerity savings and further labour reforms, including abolishing collective bargaining and making it easier to sack workers.

The Greek parliament is expected to vote on the budget Saturday. Briefing parliament on the Eurogroup meeting yesterday, Finance Minister Euclid Tsakalotos stated, "there is no way that we will legislate the measures [demanded by the IMF]." He expressed his hope that a compromise could be reached on the primary surplus target, with one percent from the total target being set aside for stimulating the economy.

Given Syriza's record of signing a third bailout agreement eight months after coming to power in January 2015 with a massive mandate to end austerity, even such mealy-mouthed appeals are worthless. Their aim is simply to give the government enough room for manoeuvre while they prepare the ground for implementing the attacks demanded by the country's creditors.

According to sources cited by online publication *TheToc.gr*, "the IMF insists on imposing wage cuts and even sackings in the public sector in parallel with the

abolishing of various public sector bodies." According to the *TheToc.gr* article, the IMF proposes that such measures be imposed automatically if payroll costs exceed a predefined percentage of GDP.

A few days ago a poll commissioned by pro-Syriza daily *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton (Ef.Syn.)*, which asked a loaded question, found that 6 in 10 Greeks are in favour of public sector workers who have had a negative performance assessment being sacked. The new performance assessment regime is due to start next year with an aim to provide an objective and scientific veneer to the predetermined agenda of gutting Greece's public sector.

The propaganda-dictated *Ef.Syn.*'s poll is aimed at softening up the public prior to mass sackings in the public sector, which is part of the wider agenda of driving down wages and conditions for the entire working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact