

Greek waste disposal workers strike against mass layoffs

Christoph Vandreier
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Approximately 10,000 waste disposal workers were thrown out of work last week by the Syriza government in Greece so as to balance the budget and fulfill potential demands from county's creditors as rapidly as possible.

Following the enforcement of brutal pension cuts, privatisations and tax hikes for the poorest sections of the population in order to meet its loan repayment obligations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Union (EU), Syriza is now turning to a brazen attack on public sector workers.

A powerful strike developed against the firings, with waste disposal workers walking off the job last Monday, bringing rubbish collection in Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities to a halt. Workers are currently blockading waste disposal facilities to prevent a state-organised strike-breaking operation. Only hospitals and other services necessary for public health have been excluded from the strike.

Workers are showing tremendous determination. "Work is all that we want, anyone around the world can understand that. Jobs so we can feed our families," Manolis Skoulas told *Xinhua*.

Skoulas formerly worked in construction, but lost his job during the economic crisis and was hired by the state waste disposal service in 2011. He has two young children and is among the workers who were laid off. "I don't know what to do. I'm 51 years old. Nobody will hire me in the private sector. They prefer younger, cheaper workers," he reported.

These are typical comments from waste disposal workers, who carry out physically demanding work and earn no more than €700 per month. Now they are being laid off without compensation.

The government is well aware of heightened social tensions and is therefore treating the striking workers

with extreme brutality. Demonstrators who gathered in front of the Interior Ministry in Athens on Monday were harshly attacked by police. According to news agency AMNA, a state prosecutor is preparing criminal proceedings against the striking workers for endangering public health. The mayor of Thessaloniki, Jannis Boutaris, has announced he will contract a private company for waste disposal.

The mass lay-off of waste disposal workers marks a new high point of the social attacks organised by Syriza in Greece.

Some of the workers being laid off have been employed by the state waste disposal service for 16 years, but have remained on temporary contracts through this time. In this way, several governments have used this as a means of securing political loyalty. The Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) promised in its election campaign to end this precarious system and to hire the workers permanently.

But Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras had barely taken office when he defended the system and merely extended the contracts for another eight months. The auditor's office declared this practice unacceptable last week because the jobs were not open-ended. The contracts of the 10,000 workers were therefore void and could not simply be extended, according to the court.

The Syriza government had no intention of taking this as an opportunity to fulfill its election pledge and provide the workers with security by hiring them permanently. Instead, Interior Minister Panos Skourletis used the decision to impose the mass layoffs. He insisted on the demand of the IMF and EU that every new hire in the public sector must be accompanied by four lay-offs in order to balance the budget.

According to this, the government will only replace

the 10,000 laid-off workers with 2,500 at the state waste disposal service. In this way, Skourletis will cut 7,500 jobs in one go. This amounts to roughly one quarter of the workforce. In addition, he intends to newly advertise the 2,500 positions so that older workers, who have been carrying out the demanding labour for many years, will hardly have any hope of being rehired.

However, it is entirely unclear whether the creditors' stipulations apply in this case, since it is not concerned with new hires in the strict sense of the term but the transformation of existing working conditions. Skourletis and Tsipras are rushing to loyally enforce the austerity demands and are going beyond the cuts called for.

On June 14, Tsipras boasted in the daily *Die Welt* that he was the best in Europe at budget cutting. "In the two years our government has been in office, we have implemented more reforms than all of the other European states combined," he said. His government has now "taken a step still further" and tabled budget proposals for 2019 and 2020 to satisfy the creditors.

In fact, Syriza has gone further than any other government in ensuring the banks, IMF and EU that they will pay back all of Greece's debt. Just to obtain the last loan tranche, the Syriza government enforced pension cuts of between 9 and 18 percent, slashed the tax-free earnings limit from €8,636 to €5,681, and cut subsidies for home heating, unemployment and other social welfare benefits. Privatisations and mass lay-offs were also made easier.

These policies have been met with strong resistance by the working class. In May, strikes were held by seamen, journalists, and public sector workers. Protests and demonstrations occur regularly. Bus drivers in Thessaloniki took strike action because their wages were not paid for months. The current strike by waste disposal workers, both in its length and intensity, has gone far beyond previous protests.

To suppress this opposition, Syriza is working closely with the trade unions, which have regularly restricted strikes and led them into a dead end. On Tuesday, officials from the union representing city and municipal workers, POE-OTA, met with Tsipras to discuss how the strike could be ended. Trade union leaders subsequently noted how well the discussions had gone and said they looked forward to an "improved offer."

But in the face of the anger among the workforce, they declared that the strike will continue until Thursday.



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