Greek unions hold one-day general strike to protest Syriza's brutal austerity measures

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Leading Greek trade unions called a one-day general strike Thursday against the savage austerity measures being imposed by the pseudo-left Syriza-led government on behalf of the European Union (EU), European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The GSEE (General Confederation of Greek Workers) private sector union confederation and its public sector counterpart, ADEDY (Supreme Administration of Greek Civil Servants Trade Unions) called the strike, to coincide with the parliamentary debate currently underway on next year's budget.

The one-day general strike affected significant sectors of the Greek economy. In the capital of Athens, services on the metro and surface transportation networks were restricted, with transport operating for limited hours only. No trains were scheduled to run from Athens to Greece's second city, Thessaloniki, between midnight on Wednesday and midnight on Thursday. Seamen and dockworkers joined the strike, with ships and ferries remaining anchored for the duration.

Health care workers also participated in the walkout, with hospitals running on a skeleton staff, and schools were shut. Public Power Corporation workers joined the strike action. Air traffic controllers took part in a four-hour walkout. Journalists in Athens struck, affecting news bulletins on Thursday along with printed newspapers.

Demonstrations and protests were scheduled to take place in more than 50 Greek cities and towns nationwide. In Athens, more than 10,000 workers, pensioners and students marched to the parliament building in Syntagma Square, where the deputies are pushing through the new raft of brutal cuts. They held up placards that read "Shame on you!" and "No more lies!", and they chanted, "Take your bailouts and get out of here".

A vote will be held on a draft "Supplemental Memorandum of Understanding", already agreed by the Syriza government, next week.

The memorandum is central to the third review of the European Stability Mechanism Programme (ESM) that Syriza entered into in August 2015, after taking power the previous January. The extent to which the EU and the global financial oligarchy have control over all decisions relating to the Greek economy and government policy is clear from the opening sections of the Memorandum.

It states, "Success [in imposing the terms of the 2015-2018 agreement] requires ownership of the reform agenda by the Greek authorities. The Government therefore stands ready to take any measures that may become appropriate for this purpose as circumstances change. The Government commits to consult and agree with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund on all actions relevant for the achievement of the objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding before these are finalised and legally adopted".

The filthy Memorandum continues, "Greece will design and implement a wide range of structural reforms that not only ensure full compliance with EU requirements, but which also aim at achieving European best practices. The authorities will continue to implement an ambitious privatisation programme, and a new independent Privatisation and Investment Fund … has been established supporting a more efficient use of resources".

Attacks must be imposed for years hence, with the loans being received by Greece from the ESM being returned immediately to pay off its debt mountain that remains at almost €300 billion [$US 353 billion]. Since coming to power, Syriza has handed over €41.6 billion in debt repayments.

The Memorandum commits the Greek government to ensuring "sustainable public finances by pursuing the fiscal path agreed in August 2015—based on primary surplus targets of the ESM programme of 1.75 and 3.5 percent of GDP in 2017 and 2018 respectively. The primary surplus target of 3.5% of GDP will be maintained over the medium term, until 2022".

The aim of Syriza's budget is to implement a range of austerity measures in order to reach the 3.5 percent of GDP primary surplus demanded by the EU and the IMF. The government must pass 110 prerequisite measures that need to be in place in time for Greece's third assessment in January. These include cuts to pensions of between 20 percent and 30 percent and a rise in stealth taxation, to be imposed from January 1, 2019. Syriza also plans further cuts to the health budget of 28 percent.

The levels of poverty already imposed on the Greek population are without precedent in peacetime Europe. According to World Bank data, household incomes have fallen by about a third since austerity began in 2009, leading to mass unemployment in double digits and up to 50 percent for young people.

According to a recent assessment by economist Panagiotis Petrakis—for the Economic Chamber of Greece—Greeks will not see a return to the level of income they had in 2009 until 2029. Commenting on his findings, the *Greek Reporter* said, "If we are talking about disposable income—what is left after deduction of taxes and levies—then the Greeks will have to be more patient, since we will need to enter the 2030s".

It continued, "According to Eurostat data, Greece was at 94% of the EU average in terms of per capita GDP, expressed in Purchasing Power Units. A year later, we had lost 9 whole points, in 2011 another 10, while in 2016—the latest data available—we were at 67% of the EU average, i.e. behind Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, and even Estonia, which was at a lower level than we were a decade ago".

Now, even more is being demanded of a working class that has already been bled dry. This week an EU official warned that the third review of the Memorandum cannot be considered completed, because about 70 percent of the 110 prerequisites have not yet been implemented.

Due to its role in imposing brutal austerity and its eagerness to roll out even greater cuts to the living standards of millions, Syriza is widely despised. Its approval rating stands at just over 20 percent. In an illustration of the popular mood, prime minister and Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras was booed and jeered by angry municipal workers Wednesday evening as he left his office in Thessaloniki. The *Greek Reporter* web site reported, "Earlier, the Greek PM apparently refused to meet a delegation of the workers, mostly staff, whose contracts are about to expire".

Syriza is seeking to severely curtail the rights of workers to strike, by increasing the turn-out for local union branches for strike votes to 50 percent. This sparked a protest outside the prime minister's Athens residence on December 5 that was attacked by riot police using tear gas.

While the third assessment is expected to pass, the real test will be over the six subsequent months, by which time Greece will have to implement an additional 82 measures as revealed by the Greek daily *Kathimerini* last week. These will see further cuts to pensions, reductions to the tax-free threshold, and the sell-off of more public assets, including coal-powered stations and the Thessaloniki port authority, etc.

The Greek trade union federations have called dozens of general strikes since the first austerity-for-loans package was signed in 2010, by the then social democratic PASOK government. These have all been designed to allow workers to let off steam while the measures passed, regardless.

The union bureaucracy are aware that this discredited tactic has run its course, a fact expressed in an ADEDY statement on the strike. It felt compelled to issue an extraordinary mea culpa in regard to its role, along with the GSEE, in facilitating the destruction of workers' living standards.

"The corporate and government trade unions GSEE-ADEDY are hugely responsible, given that once again they followed a line of defeat and submission as they waited for the government's initiatives instead of calling workers to fight and coordinating the struggle for the overthrow", said ADEDY.

Seeking a means to control an inevitable upsurge in workers militancy as the full extent of Syriza's austerity is felt, ADEDY called for the setting up of "committees of struggle" and for "the co-ordination of local unions" in order to facilitate "an increase in strikes to prevent the [austerity] measures coming to a vote".

Behind the new, empty rhetoric, the aim is to achieve the opposite: namely to ensure that any future struggles do not break out as unofficial actions, independent of the trade unions, but remain under their control in order that they might be smothered and led into harmless channels.