General strike in Greece against Syriza's latest austerity package

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Greek workers staged a general strike Wednesday against the savage austerity programme being imposed by the pseudo-left Syriza government. The strike follows a general strike held last December and further industrial action by workers in January, including protests against measures severely restricting the right to take industrial action.

The stoppage, nearly the 50th general strike since 2010, was called by the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) private-sector union confederation and its public-sector counterpart, the Supreme Administration of Greek Civil Servants Trade Unions (ADEDY). The urban transport network was largely halted, including train and ferry services across Greece.

Bus and trolley services operated on a reduced schedule. Air traffic controllers held a three-hour strike, with Aegean and Olympic Air cancelling three return flights and rescheduling 50 flight legs. Schools and public hospitals were forced to run with emergency staff. Journalists supported the strike, resulting in cancelled news bulletins.

Protesters gathered in central Athens and other cities. The main demonstration was held in Klafthmonos Square. Striking workers, including migrant labourers, marched through central Athens along with pensioners and students. Demonstrators carried banners and placards, and the march ended outside the Greek parliament in the main Syntagma Square.

A separate demonstration in Omonia Square attended by thousands was held by the All Workers Militant Front (PAME), the union federation affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece.

Following its landslide election victory in January 2015, Syriza betrayed its mandate to end the austerity imposed by previous conservative and social democratic governments on behalf of the European Union (EU), the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Ignoring a referendum vote decisively rejecting austerity in July of that year, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras signed a Third Memorandum with the EU committing his government to carrying out even more brutal cuts.

On August 20, Greece is set to formally exit the EU bailout and return to the international financial markets to seek funding for its colossal debts. Since its debt crisis began in 2009, Greece has received €260 billion in loans in exchange for the implementation of the austerity measures, including public-sector layoffs, tax hikes and pension cuts. This has not reduced the country's mountain of debt by a single euro. Virtually every cent has been handed back to the banks to meet interest payments. The EU and IMF are demanding that Greece pay £57 billion in loan obligations and interest over the next four years.

Syriza plans to pass another austerity package by June 14 that will include the privatisation of the energy sector. A meeting of euro zone finance ministers is set for June 21 to judge Greece's compliance with the EU's diktats.

The idea that austerity will cease when Greece exits the bailout programme is a sick joke. The programme agreed by Syriza has been specifically designed to ensure a reduction in workers' living standards for years to come so as to hand over further billions to the international financial elite. Proposed measures include tax increases and further cuts in pensions of 18 percent to be imposed beginning in January 2019, with 300,000 to 700,000 families hit. Further cuts are scheduled for 2020.

On May 21, *Kathemerini* reported that "top cabinet officials declared publicly—both within Greece and to the country's creditors—that pending measures, including pension cuts, will be enforced."

This week, the European Commission published a Supplemental Memorandum of Understanding with Syriza to run from 2019 to 2022. It stipulates several years of high primary surpluses and the implementation of dozens of agreed austerity policies.

It states, "Success 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."

Syriza cannot enact any legislation without the say so of the "troika." The memorandum notes, "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."

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras boasted to business leaders at the annual conference of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV) that his government has imposed every attack on the Greek working class demanded by the troika. He referred to the praise he received earlier this month from Angel Gurria, head of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Gurria told him in person, "I would like to congratulate you, your administration and the whole of Greece for an impressive stabilisation effort and one of the most ambitious reform packages we have seen at the OECD in recent times."

An article on the *Stuff* news site noted: "Tsipras smiled, hugged Gurria and promised to keep reforming the economy—and demanded debt relief."

Under PASOK, New Democracy and Syriza, austerity and the evisceration of democratic rights have been imposed by means of state repression. That this will continue was symbolised Wednesday by the stationing of riot police around Athens. The police, including a contingent protecting the offices of the SEV, attacked a number of protesters.

The cuts already in place are still not enough. The European Commission, endorsing a call by the OECD, issued a report stating that the only avenue left to bring Greek pensioners out of poverty is to raise the retirement age for all!

Since 2010, Greece's gross domestic product has been reduced by a quarter. Wages have been slashed, with the active collaboration of the trade unions, by an average of 15 percent.

In the private sector, the collapse has been staggering. In 2012, the minimum take-home pay of a full-time private-sector worker was US$848 a month. This was slashed to US$690 a month in February of that year. Many workers are earning much less, as the figures mask the fact that half of all new jobs are part-time or seasonal. After three years of Syriza in power, Labour Ministry figures reveal that the poorest one-third of private-sector workers now received a starvation wage of just US$445 a month.

Masses of people remain unemployed, with official unemployment still over 20 percent and at 45 percent for young people.

As far as the trade union bureaucracies are concerned, the latest limited one-day strike is a means of letting off steam so they can continue working to impose the demands of big business and the banks. After congratulating Syriza for its role in pauperising the working class, SEV President Theodore Fessas alerted big business of the necessity to deepen its collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy. "We need a new social agreement between workers and employers that is set on terms for the future and not the past," he said. "In collaboration with GSEE, on labour development issues, we are putting together a strategic plan for workforce retraining."

Despite the efforts of the unions to curtail the class struggle, in recent months workers from many sectors, including port workers, have engaged in strikes and protests against Syriza. In its statement on the general strike, in which dockworkers participated, the union felt obliged to warn the government, "For workers, pensioners and the unemployed, the end of the bailout in August 2018 is not an automatic process that will bring prosperity, but the beginning of new struggles."