

Greek general strike against attacks on right to demonstrate and devastating coronavirus policy

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The mood in the international working class is strained to the breaking point. As millions of people were demonstrating against the government across India on Thursday, tens of thousands of public sector workers and employees in Greece also went on a nationwide 24-hour general strike.

They were protesting against the devastating coronavirus policies and demanded better protective measures, the confiscation of private hospitals, mass hiring of health workers and salary increases. This week, the total number of infections in Greece exceeded the 100,000 mark and the death toll rose to over 2,000. Given the overcrowded intensive care units in northern Greece, patients had to be transported to Athens by a special flight for the first time.

The strike was also directed against the authoritarian attacks of the state in the spirit of the military junta, which brutally ruled the country from 1967 to 1974 with the support of NATO. Demonstrators demanded the immediate withdrawal of the draft for a new labour law that would abolish the eight-hour day and drastically restrict the right to strike and demonstrate.

While the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GSEE) collaborates closely with the government during the pandemic, the Public Services Union (ADEDY) and the Public Hospitals Union (POEDIN) had called for the strike to try and keep the resistance under control. In addition to doctors, nurses and public employees, transport workers, dockworkers, journalists, teachers and cultural workers also took part in the strike. Ports, the subways and the electric train in Athens stood still. Strikers from all over the country gathered in front of hospitals, observing the coronavirus safety measures.

In downtown Athens, small rallies were held in front of the Labour Ministry and the Health Ministry. A large police force was deployed to intimidate the protesters.

Athenian artists rode in a motorcycle protest convoy past the hospitals to the Health Ministry. “Police everywhere—intensive care beds nowhere” and “Money for health, not for Aegean Airlines [largest Greek airline]” were written on their posters. With these slogans, they denounced the class politics of the government, which is putting vast sums into big business and increasing the repressive powers of the state, while the public

health system is falling apart.

Air traffic controllers also wanted to down tools but were prevented from doing so by court order shortly before the strike began. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transportation had gone to court against the strike in the aviation industry and was granted an injunction. The airlines celebrated and announced flights would operate normally.

In the last weeks and months workers, students and young people had taken to the streets against the government under the right-wing conservative New Democracy (Nea Dimokratia, ND). In early April, at the beginning of the pandemic, doctors and nurses protested nationwide. In the summer, thousands demonstrated against the massive restrictions on the right to demonstrate. In September and October, thousands of students occupied over 700 schools, demanding huge investments in education rather than the military.

In mid-November, hospital workers again organised protest actions as part of a “National Action Day for Health.” Students at the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki occupied the rector’s office to draw attention to the dangerous conditions in their student residences. They demanded mass tests, better cleaning and safety measures against COVID-19. The Health Ministry ignored the demands and sent in the police instead to suppress the protests.

The growing strikes and protests by the Greek working class and youth raise fundamental political questions. Few countries in recent years have experienced as many general strikes as Greece. Whenever the pressure becomes too great and the wrath of the workers threatens to break out uncontrollably, the unions resort to general strikes and ensure that resistance is channeled into a dead end. They deliberately prevent a European-wide and the international unification of the struggles, although the pandemic makes a worldwide response by the working class necessary.

The general strike covered only the civil service and was limited by the organisers to a purely national framework. The calls for the strike by the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations associated with them, such as the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Antarsya alliance,

contain no reference to the international situation, nor make an appeal to the European working class or demand the closure of all non-essential production with payment of full wages to protect all workers from the virus. The union officials do not articulate the interests of the workers but speak for prosperous sections of the middle classes who fear a revolutionary movement of the working class like the devil fears holy water.

It is significant that Syriza, the largest pseudo-left organisation in Greece and nominal leader of the parliamentary opposition, has effectively blacked out the general strike. There was no official strike call, let alone a statement by party leader Alexis Tsipras on Twitter or YouTube. Tsipras hurries from one hospital to the next to have his picture taken with doctors and nurses and to pretend to support them. But Greek workers know only too well what these false statements and empty phrases mean. They experienced it first-hand when Syriza, with Tsipras as prime minister, implemented the austerity dictates of the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank when in government for four years. Syriza imposed massive cuts in health, education and social services.

Now, the pseudo-left party essentially acts as a loyal parliamentary opposition. On Thursday, the day of the general strike, Syriza representative Giorgos Katrougalos met with Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, who informed him about the new strategic partnership with the United Arab Emirates. Katrougalos, who was himself Foreign Minister in 2019 and who implemented drastic pension cuts in 2015 as Labour Minister, welcomed the cooperation with the Emirates. When he criticised the government, he did so from the right. A foreign policy “strategy” was lacking and “clear red lines” against neighbouring Turkey were needed, the Syriza politician said. Both sides agree on the need for a more aggressive imperialist policy, which of course requires billions in arms expenditures.

On the domestic front, too, Syriza and the unions agree in essence with the government’s course and play a key role in pushing through the deadly herd immunity policy against enormous resistance.

Although the pandemic situation in Greece is currently on a knife-edge, the government wants to gradually lift the lockdown on December 7. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Education Minister Niki Kerameos declared that the first thing to do was to reopen schools. In an interview with *RealNews*, Kerameos again claimed that children were less likely to be affected by the virus. Elementary schools had only been closed to limit social mixing and traffic by parents, he said.

Children are to be brought back to classrooms in the middle of winter, despite exploding coronavirus numbers, so that their parents are available for the job market. At the same time, the government has hardly spent any money to make distance learning technically and financially feasible for all students.

The dangerous reopening of schools is also supported by the

teachers’ union OLME, which wants to link it only to certain safety precautions. In its call for a strike, OLME demands more education spending and the “necessary measures for running open schools under safe health conditions.” During the demonstration, the trade unionist P. Saraidari criticised the government for not carrying out mass tests and increasing staff, but said, “We believe that schools must be open, with safeguards.”

Syriza uses the cynical argument of child welfare to promote open “safe” schools, criticising the government for having “no plan” for education. “The school closures shows the bankruptcy of the Ministry of Education,” Syriza’s parliamentary group on education wrote in a statement in early November. Because of the “social discrimination” in the pandemic, “we must all try not to alienate children from the educational and social environment of the school and to return students to in-person classes under safe and educational conditions.” While Syriza speaks of “social discrimination,” the organisation was responsible for trampling on “child welfare” with its austerity policies and stole the future from a whole generation of young people.

The second wave of the pandemic finds a society that has been destroyed by the EU’s austerity dictates over the past ten years. While Greece’s oligarchs withdraw to their yachts and luxury villas, rejoicing in their rising share prices, most families are defenceless and at the mercy of the pandemic. Death, unemployment, low wages, poverty pensions, lack of prospects—this is the bleak reality that drives masses of people to the barricades again and again.

But a real struggle for social equality and the containment of the pandemic requires that Greek workers and youth go beyond the framework of the worn-out trade union nostrums and form their own rank-and-file safety committees, independent of all bourgeois and pseudo-left organisations and unite across national borders. Workers and young people need a socialist programme to settle accounts with the criminal coronavirus policy worldwide. Big business and the banks must be expropriated, capitalist governments overthrown in the fight for a society that puts health and life before the profits of the oligarchs.



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