

Greek police attack strikers at Kavala Oil

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On December 21, at about 6:00 a.m., 450 Greek police and riot police stormed the plant run by Kavala Oil to end the occupation of the facility by 120 workers. The workers had occupied the management offices and guarded the plant facilities to protest plans for layoffs and massive security problems.

The oil refinery in the village of Nea Karvali, east of the city of Kavala in northeastern Greece, is part of the oil and gas production facilities extracting resources from the Prinos field, located in the North Aegean off the island of Thasos. Energean, the parent company of Kavala Oil, with headquarters in London, plans to cut wages and lay off approximately 80 of the 240 workers, around a third of the workforce. Full-time experienced workers, who are familiar with the machinery and safety risks, are to be increasingly replaced by subcontracted labour.

Workers have now been on strike since January 1, demanding the company comply with work regulations and emergency plans. “We are forced to work 12-hour days nonstop and are now physically and mentally exhausted,” they write in a statement, criticising, among other things, the circumvention of basic regulations for the safe operation of onshore and offshore installations, leading to a serious risk of accidents.

The strike expresses the growing militancy of the Greek working class. On December 10 and 11, dockers and seamen had demanded wage increases in a 48-hour strike. All over the world, workers are opposing measures aimed at unloading the costs of the pandemic onto their shoulders. In neighbouring Turkey, a spontaneous strike by thousands of electricity workers broke out in the summer, and Turkish doctors and nurses went on strike across the country in December. In the US, thousands of teachers are currently protesting against the perilous return to face-to-face teaching as Omicron infections soar.

The Greek government headed by the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy, ND) is continuing the social attacks of the last decades in the pandemic and pursuing a dangerous herd immunity policy. Coronavirus infections have skyrocketed dramatically in recent days. On January 4, this small country of just under 11 million people counted a record number of more than 50,000 new cases. Industrial workers are doubly affected by the pandemic, exposed to a high risk of infection in their factories as well as being hit by job cuts and lost wages.

Energean is trying to break the resistance of its workforce with intimidation and violence. According to the local news site proinews.gr, this was the first time that riot police have been deployed against workers at the plant. According to a spokesperson for the Kavala Oil workers’ union, police broke down the gate next to a gas and oil pipeline, where just a small

leak could have caused a huge explosion.

A video posted on Facebook by the social activist group Menoume Energoi shows workers using water hoses to try to push back the police, who deployed stun grenades. According to reports, one grenade hit a high-voltage transformer, causing a temporary power outage.

To escape from police, workers climbed to the top of a tower, where they remained for hours until they were guaranteed lawyers would be present. From 5:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., police besieged the tower and even denied water to the workers held there, a union spokesperson said.

The irresponsible use of stun grenades at an oil refinery could have resulted in a lethal explosion. These brutal tactics illustrate the modus operandi of Greece’s police and its riot police units, who function as the attack dogs of the corporations.

The local police directorate then claimed that workers had spilled hydrogen sulphide in the direction of the police, a claim the workers indignantly denied. This baseless lie showed total ignorance of the toxic danger of hydrogen sulphide, the use of which would have caused immediate deaths, workers related.

A total of 17 workers were arrested by police and taken into custody. Later that evening, a solidarity protest was held in front of Kavala police headquarters, followed by a protest march through the city. The workers were released the next day. Police used teargas to disperse oil workers gathered in front of the courthouse to welcome their colleagues. One worker was injured.

A few days after the police action, another demonstration took place in which workers from different professions and companies showed their solidarity with the oil workers. They gathered in the central square Kapnergatiki, where a monument commemorates Kavala’s militant tobacco workers.

Kavala was an important centre of the tobacco industry in the first half of the 20th century and had already experienced violent attacks on the workers’ movement. In June 1928, a major tobacco workers strike led to violent clashes with the police during which six workers were killed. In May 1936, tobacco workers went on strike in Kavala, Thessaloniki and other cities and were once again brutally suppressed by the police. A few months later, in August 1936, General Ioannis Metaxas established a military dictatorship in Greece, imposing a regime of terror against the working class.

Energean responded to the strike notice of the Kavala Oil union “To Vareli” with an extrajudicial letter declaring the work stoppage illegal and threatened the strikers with dismissal. The layoffs at Kavala Oil came just a few months after parent company Energean received a €100 million government-guaranteed loan from the country’s COVID-19 Aid Fund, ostensibly to secure jobs

and maintain the company's financial viability. The corporation directly commenced layoffs and introduced a "Voluntary Exit Program" to force workers to quit.

The financial aid from the state, which goes toward investments and maximising profits, was approved by the European Commission and justified with the financial losses made by the Prinos site in the first pandemic year, losses arising mainly from falling oil prices. At the same time, workers at Energean had to continue working without restrictions during the pandemic. "Zero operational downtime due to COVID-19" and "production operations running as normal," management proudly announced in its 2020 business report.

The oil workers, however, can only successfully wage their struggle against dismissals and cuts by organising independently of the trade unions and the bourgeois and pseudo-left parties. This is especially evident at Kavala Oil. To Vareli, the local trade union that belongs to the Panhellenic Energy Federation, has been cooperating with management for decades to keep the plant profitable at the expense of the workers. The union even admits this itself. In its statement of December 24 announcing the strike to take place beginning New Year's Day, the union declared:

"To date, we have supported the company by accepting wage cuts, a freeze on the insurance [pension and benefits] programme in 2015, machine operator job cuts, unpaid overtime for 2015 to 2018 and for 2020, and many other concessions that the employer has failed to properly appreciate."

The union had drawn attention to major safety problems at the plant several times in recent months and asked for talks with management. "Unfortunately, we have not been listened to," laments the union, making clear that it only resorted to strike action with a heavy heart in an effort to head off the enormous anger in the workforce.

"Unfortunately, the employer has left us no other choice," the union writes, while fueling illusions in Energean's good will. "We hope that the employer will soon comply with legal requirements, labour regulations, the land and sea emergency plan and the firefighting and marine pollution emergency plans, so we can all resume our work, which is our only livelihood, and enable Prinos to return to normality."

When the price of oil plummeted in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic, the union's president, Manolis Kelaidakis, immediately offered to assist the company. In May, he wrote that the union was ready to help management:

"We as a union have experienced such crises many times from a position of responsibility—I remind you of the period of self-management—and we know how serious it is when pricing affects the whole planning. So, we took action and met with the relevant bodies, the MPs, the deputy mayor and the mayor."

Referring to the "period of self-management," Kelaidakis alludes to the early 2000s when company management temporarily passed into the hands of the union after shareholders withdrew due to expected profit losses. This "self-management" essentially meant that the union restructured the plant at the expense of the workers.

By the late 1990s, the then owner of the Prinos oilfield, the international consortium North Aegean Oil Company (NAPC), had

pulled out of the business because of declining output and a drop in oil prices. The entire operation went over to the Greek state, which transferred the facilities to the company Kavala Oil SA in 1999. Initially this company consisted of two partners: the Eurotechniki concern (67 percent) and the workers' cooperative (33 percent).

The majority of Eurotechniki's shares were bought by the British oil company Regal Petroleum in 2003, but the company pulled out two years later when it became clear that an explored new field was not producing the hoped-for economic yield. As a result, management of the oilfields and refinery passed to the union, which then referred to it as a "self-managed company." Although oil prices on the world market began to rise again from 2004, the union managers demanded that workers at Kavala Oil accept stagnating wages and further sacrifices.

This eventually benefited Energean Oil & Gas, which acquired 100 percent of shares in Kavala Oil in 2007 and finally took over the company in 2019. Energean, on the stock market in London and Tel Aviv since 2018, invests primarily in gas and oil sectors in the Mediterranean, including Israel, Egypt and Italy, in addition to Greece.

The union continued to have a strong position in the management of the company. Kelaidakis was "vice president of the self-governing company Kavala Oil" from 2009 to 2013 and worked closely with Vangelis Pappas, who was first union president and then "president of the self-governing company Kavala Oil" from 2005 to 2013. Both are members of the local KAP (Socially Effective Intervention) party in Kavala.

The CEO of Energean, Mathios Rigas, announced last year that the company intends to pay dividends for the first time ever at the end of 2022. In other words, Energean is now trying to cut jobs and lower safety standards at its plants so that the facilities yield more returns and shareholders can enjoy bumper profits this year.

The striking workers at Kavala Oil are courageously opposing these attacks but to succeed they need a global strategy and their own rank-and-file committee to extend the strike and reach out to workers in other plants in Greece and all over the world. The trade unions function as co-managers in every country, seeking to isolate workers from one another and suppress the growing wave of international protests and strikes against attacks on jobs and wages and the herd immunity policies. This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the building of the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to organise workers independently of the unions and unite them in a common worldwide struggle against capitalism.



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