

General strike in Greece against destruction of living standards worsened by Ukraine war

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Greek workers from every sector of the economy mounted a 24-hour general strike yesterday. The strike was called in opposition to a cost-of-living crisis hitting millions and rising social inequality. It paralysed much of the country.

Public transport largely ground to a halt in the Athens where no services ran on the subway, tram, trolley or suburban railway. Buses ran only 12 hours from 9a.m. with two three-hour stoppages by bus workers at the start and end of their shifts. Ferries which play a critical role serving Greece's many islands remained in ports. Schools were closed as state-run services closed. Health care workers treated only emergency cases in state-run hospitals.

The strike would have had an even greater impact but for the anti-democratic, intervention of the Civil Aviation Service who secured a court order making illegal the participation of air traffic controllers, electrical engineers, and telecommunications personnel.

The movement of Greek workers is part of global eruption of the class struggle fuelled by the decimation of workers living standards, fuelled by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Strikes and mass protests have broken out against savage austerity in many countries in recent weeks, including Sri Lanka, Spain, Sudan, Tunisia and Canada.

The income of millions has been slashed particularly by soaring energy prices that have been made much worse by Greece's participation in economic sanctions against Russia. Forty percent of Greece's annual energy needs comes from gas supplies imported from Russia.

This assault is made on a working class that has suffered a nearly 15 year social and economic war on its living standards by successive governments led by the social democratic PASOK; the pseudo-left SYRIZA (in government from 2015-2019) and the conservative New Democracy (ND).

The strike was called by Greece's two main unions representing 2.5 million workers, the private sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector Civil Servants' Confederation federation (ADEDY). The Stalinist Communist Party (KKE)-run All Workers

Militant Front (PAME) federation participated.

Rallies were held in all main cities and towns with over 70 taking place throughout the day. Tens of thousands participated in the Athens rallies, with the Associated Press reporting that "9,000 protesters held marches in Greece's second-largest city of Thessaloniki in the north."

In Athens, three rallies were held in different squares, led by the different federations and leftist political parties.

The thousands attending rallies spoke for millions, using the occasion to denounce the ND government's heavy involvement in the war deliberately provoked by the US and NATO powers. Thousands attended the PAME rally in the main Syntagma square, in front of the Greek Parliament. PAME's poster promoting the rally included the slogans "Against the cost-of-living increase", "For Collective Bargaining and increases to wages" and "No to Greece's involvement in the war".

The KKE and PAME are ferociously nationalist organisations whose history is steeped in the counter-revolutionary crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy. Its constituency includes members and their descendants who recall the fascist occupation of the country by Hitler's troops in the Second World War and the taking of power by the US-backed fascist junta in 1967, which remained in power until 1974. Such calls against war by PAME/KKE, as well as their statements opposing imperialism, are always made from the standpoint of defending Greece's "national interests".

PAME, as with the other main union federations, is acutely aware of growing anti-imperialist sentiment and opposition to a ruling elite more broadly in the working class, with Greece deepening its ties with NATO and functioning as a key base for provocations against Russia.

Such is the strength of feeling that the trade union bureaucracy is forced to make a tactical shift. The *Press Project* website reported, "For its part ADEDY has given an anti-war tone to the strike action" with its call for an immediate cessation of the war. It is "accusing the government of utilizing the war to shift its own

responsibility for the rise in the cost of living, cuts to workers' wages and to continue its anti-worker and neo-liberal policies.”

Inflation is rising exponentially, surging from 6.2 percent in January to 7.2 percent in February and according to preliminary data released last week, reaching 8 percent in March. A Greek Statistical Agency study in February found that inflation has pushed electricity prices up by a staggering 71.4 percent. The cost of natural gas is up by 78.5 percent. Many families rely on heating oil to warm their homes, now priced 41.5 percent higher. Prices for fuels and lubricants rose by 23.2 percent.

Such prices are simply unaffordable in a country where the minimum wage is just €663 a month (US\$723) following a tiny increase in the rate by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' ND government in January. Given the soaring rate of inflation on top of terrible reduction of living standards already imposed, a 13 percent rise in the minimum wage called for by the GSEE would take it to just €751.

Energy price rises and the rising price of basic goods, as well as shortages of bread and other flour-based products has triggered a social crisis. Greece imports about 250,000 tonnes of soft wheat from Russia and Ukraine, 30 percent of its total wheat imports. Even before the Ukraine war, the wholesale cost of wheat had already surged 80 percent higher than in 2020, mainly due to energy costs. Two weeks ago, supermarket imposed restrictions on how much flour, oil and other items could be bought.

“Our life now is just being in debt,” Georgios Alexandropoulos, a 60-year-old courier worker told Reuters during the strike. “I owe the electricity company and my landlord, I'm two months behind in rent, and I owe the last two electricity bills. Soon we will be in debt to everyone... we can't go on like this.” Psychologist Michalis Tokaras said he was forced to “cut back on everything”, adding, “We have to choose between paying our mortgage or paying bills. We've reached the bottom.”

The GSEE said on calling the strike, “For the last 14 years, workers have been carrying the burden of a deep crisis that has affected everyone's incomes and lives.”

The demands of the trade union bureaucracy, with ADEDY also calling for wage increases at least equal to GDP growth and inflation and abolition of the hated solidarity tax of between 1 percent and 4 percent of income—first introduced in 2011 and supposed to expire in 2015—are deeply cynical. The unions have collaborated with governments to suppress every struggle of the working class year after year.

The struggle by workers against the systematic lowering of its social position and super-exploitation by corporations is now intersecting with growing opposition to war,

imperialism and dictatorship.

For weeks, workers in Thessaloniki at the Greek railway company TrainOSE refused to transport NATO military armoured vehicles to the Ukrainian border that had arrived in Greece on US cargo vessels at Alexandroupolis port in the north. They were to be sent to Romania and Poland on the Ukrainian border for use by the Zelensky regime. Despite TrainOSE threatening workers with dismissal, they were unable to secure agreement to move the train. In the end the company had to recruit scabs to take the train to Alexandroupolis.

According to reports, eight strikers were arrested yesterday in Thessaloniki, including, according to the *Ta Nea* daily, members of the KKE central committee. A rally was held yesterday evening at the police headquarters in the city to demand their release.

The political significance of the action in Greece was underscored by the response of Ukrainian neo-Nazis who yesterday denounced “Members of the red rabble in Greece... A platoon of Ukrainian nationalist formations would solve the problem once and for all.” Referring to the fascist junta that ruled Greece, they added, “Let's bring back the power of the ‘black colonels’—quickly and efficiently.”

In the face of a tidal wave of government and media propaganda demonising Russia and demanding everyone sacrifice their living conditions to back the NATO operation, *Ta Nea* reported that a majority of two thirds in a poll conducted for the *Journal of the Editors* said that shipping war material to Ukraine puts Greece at risk.

A majority supported only humanitarian aid being sent. Only 32 percent answered that both humanitarian aid and war material should be sent. Only a slim majority (53 percent) believed that the war will be limited locally, and 40 percent feared it is likely to lead to a global conflict.



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