

Anti-austerity strike brings Greece to a halt

By Christoph Dreier
7 November 2012

Tuesday saw the beginning of a 48-hour general strike in Greece against the government's austerity measures, which are being presented to parliament for agreement today. The fourth mass protest in the last six weeks, it came amid escalating strikes and protests spreading throughout the Greek workforce.

On Tuesday, Athens and other Greek cities ground to a halt. No public transport was running at all. Banks and post offices were shut, as were many government offices and museums. At midday, according to the police, some 40,000 people gathered on Syntagma Square in front of the Greek parliament to express their anger with the new round of austerity measures.

"They should go to hell, and beyond," 65-year-old pensioner Anais Metaxopoulou said. "They should ask me how I feel when I have to go to church to beg for food. I wouldn't hurt a fly, but I would happily behead one of them."

Last week, parliament agreed to additional privatisation measures, which will lead to more wage cuts and sackings. Today, the latest package of cuts is to be agreed, which includes further cuts in wages and pensions, cuts to child benefits, and mass sackings in the public sector. Some €13.5 billion are thus to be saved and placed at the disposal of the banks.

In total 150,000 jobs in the public sector and in state factories will be destroyed. Wages in state factories, such as electricity works, are to fall by up to 30 percent. The government also wants to abolish the Christmas bonus paid to pensioners and civil servants, as well as cutting pensions by 5 to 15 percent, leading to an estimated annual loss of income of €2,000 for every pensioner. The retirement age will be raised from 65 to 67.

"Someone needs to tell them there's nothing left to cut," said Vassilis Dimosthenous, a 50-year-old construction worker who has been without a job for 10 months. "They've made our daily lives unbearable. If

only I was 10 years younger I'd leave this place."

Dimosthenous is pointing to the fact that wages in Greece have already fallen by up to 60 percent in the last two years, while consumption taxes have risen. Unemployment has risen to over 25 percent. Despite swingeing cuts, state indebtedness has risen even further, as every cent has gone to the banks and speculators.

Public transport workers had already taken strike action last week in protest against the new cuts. On Monday, they were joined by hospital workers, who face the loss of one in ten jobs as well as a cut of €1.5 billion in the health service under the new cuts package. The lack of medicines and run-down infrastructure also means that they are hardly able to carry out the work and help the sick. Only emergency cases will be dealt with in the clinics up to Wednesday.

Taxi drivers, electricity workers and journalists also took strike action on Monday. The latter face the loss of their social insurance since the government plans to integrate their industry-specific scheme into the bankrupt National Organization for Health Care Provision (EOPPY). This has been insolvent for weeks, with those belonging to EOPPY having to pay for medicines out of pocket or when first visiting the doctor.

The two large trade union federations, GSEE and ADEDY, have called for a two-day strike rather than the usual 24 hours, reflecting the growing militancy in the working class. The bureaucrats hope thus to maintain control over the protests.

Greece has seen dozens of such protests since the first austerity measures were imposed; they merely serve to blow off steam and to prevent a serious working class movement developing against the government and the EU. The protests have been organised by the unions so they do the least damage and have no real political outcome.

The strikes are not only for just a limited time, enabling the state and the employers to prepare for them, but they do not include important sectors of the economy. For example, strikes were only held for three hours at the airports on Tuesday, so that flights were not seriously affected.

Like other such one-day strikes in Greece and throughout Europe, what inevitably emerges is the vast contradiction between the social power of the working class, and the treacherous policies of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracies that control the strike. Together with the petty-bourgeois “left” parties, they do everything they can to limit a struggle against the reactionary and bankrupt austerity policies of the European Union and the Greek government.

The largest opposition party, the Coalition of the Alternative Left (SYRIZA), has also called for support for the demonstrations. However, SYRIZA has made clear in the last weeks that it rejects every serious initiative that could actually halt the cuts.

It has not only repeated its readiness to accept the diktats of the EU and that it merely seeks to re-negotiate the cuts, but has also assured the government in Athens that SYRIZA deputies will not force new elections, as is possible under the Greek constitution.

Greek workers can only repulse the massive attacks being carried out by the government at the behest of the EU when they free themselves from these organisations and take up a struggle on a socialist perspective, to unite workers throughout Europe against the social counterrevolution being propagated by the EU.

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