

Greek workers strike against austerity measures

By Christoph Dreier
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On Thursday, Greece witnessed numerous protests and strikes against the government's austerity measures and its brutal crackdown against strikers. In addition to a walkout by doctors and nurses, bus drivers, dock workers and power station employees all downed tools.

Hundreds of workers in the health sector gathered on Syntagma Square in central Athens to protest against the cuts in the hospitals. Doctors and nurses launched a 24-hour strike on Thursday and only dealt with emergencies.

Demonstrators chanted slogans such as "We will strike until victory" and held banners reading "We will throw out the troika", referring to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission and European Central Bank (ECB), which has dictated five brutal packages of austerity measures for Greece.

In addition to clinical staff, those striking also include general practitioners, who will now receive 20 percent less in fees from EOPYY, Greece's largest health insurance provider.

While the state of the health care system is already catastrophic due to the previous cuts, the new austerity measures threaten it with complete collapse. In November of last year, €1.5 billion in further cuts to the health sector were dictated. These are to be achieved in part through layoffs and the closure of hospitals. In the last three years, according to figures from the Athens Medical Association (ISA), 4,000 doctors have left the country—with more following.

Medical workers are on the streets not only because they face layoffs and wage cuts, but also because they can no longer properly perform their life-saving work. They lack the most basic materials and especially staff. In addition to the withdrawal of the cuts, they are demanding the employment of an additional 6,000

doctors and 20,000 nurses.

The medical workers' strike was supported by a four-hour work stoppage in the public sector. Numerous post and tax offices were closed, and government administrative operations were hit. In addition, port workers started a 24-hour strike, crippling ferry traffic between the Greek islands almost completely.

As well as these long-planned strikes, there were also work stoppages affecting the buses, trolley buses and railways. Transport workers demonstrated their solidarity with their colleagues on the trams and subways, who faced police violence and were forced back to work under martial law last Friday. Like the other strikers, they were protesting against planned pay cuts.

On Sunday, the solidarity strike by bus drivers was declared illegal by the courts. After the union cut short the protests on Monday, it is now strictly limiting further action to a 24-hour strike. In a ballot, the transport workers had voted to continue their previous action. Subways and trams were operating regularly. The unions ended the strike immediately after the police action.

The Union of Electrical Workers, whose members are affected by the same pay cuts, also called for a solidarity strike on Thursday. However, power supplies were not affected.

On Wednesday, 35 members of the union PAME, controlled by the Greek Communist Party (KKE), occupied the Ministry of Labour. Police cleared the building and arrested the occupants. On Thursday, about a thousand supporters gathered outside the courthouse to demand the release of the detainees. The KKE has organized similar media stunts in the past, but refuses to organize any extensive strike action against

the government and its austerity program.

Thursday's strikes and protests were part of the massive resistance of Greek workers to the government's latest austerity package, which is being implemented step by step since last November. Since the beginning of the year, various groups of workers have organized strikes and protests. Last week, even farmers blockaded some motorways with their tractors to protest against tax increases.

The lives of the majority of the population in Greece have become simply unbearable in recent years. The unemployment rate is now over 26 percent, and far more than half of young people have no jobs. Wages have already been reduced by up to 60 percent as a result of the first four austerity packages. Now they are to be reduced again by up to 25 percent.

Under these conditions, social conflicts are constantly intensifying. The government of the conservative New Democracy (ND), social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left (DIMAR) has responded by quashing the subway workers' strike and banning any sympathy strikes. Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (ND) has already announced a crackdown on all strikes that have any real economic impact.

In pursuing this hardline approach, the government can rely on the unions. While the two major trade union confederations—GSEE and ADEDY—condemned the attacks on subway workers, they have failed to take any measures to defend them. They merely announced a 24-hour general strike for early February, which is being orchestrated in discussions with the government.

On Thursday, the unions did everything possible to strictly limit the strikes and were careful to isolate them from one another. There was not even a joint demonstration called of all strikers. At the same time, as with the action at the electricity works, all was done to ensure that the strikes had minimal impact. In this way, the trade unions want to prevent the development of a broad movement against the austerity measures and the attacks on strikers.

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