

Greek government threatens striking ferry workers with martial law

By Christoph Dreier
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The Greek government has announced that it intends to ban a strike by ferry workers against wage cuts and sackings and place the workers under martial law if they do not return to work in the next few days.

The Greek daily *Kathimerini* reported that New Democratic (ND) Prime Minister Antonis Samaras held discussions over the weekend on invoking martial law against the striking workers in the form of a so-called “civil mobilization,” in which the workers are drafted into the army and ordered to return to work under threat of imprisonment for up to five years.

The government, a coalition led by the right-wing New Democracy and including the social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left (DIMAR), a split-off from SYRIZA, decided to wait and see if the ferry workers ended the strike themselves. The workers began their strike last Thursday, largely shutting off the Greek islands from intercourse with the mainland. They extended the strike on Friday for 48 hours, and extended it for an additional 48 hours on Sunday.

In response, the government issued its martial law threat against the workers, claiming, with typical cynicism, to be acting in behalf of inhabitants of the islands. New Democracy Minister of Shipping Konstis Mousouroulis declared, “We cannot be shutting our ears to the islanders’ desperate calls.”

The illegalisation of the ferry workers’ strike would mark the second use of martial law in the past two weeks. On January 25, a strike by Athens subway workers was broken when the workers were drafted into civilian military service and attacked by the police. The emergency law, which was supposedly intended for use in response to natural disasters or the outbreak of war, was previously used against truck drivers in 2010 and sanitation workers in 2011. In the 37 years prior to the imposition of successive austerity packages

beginning in 2010, the law was invoked just six times.

The repeated use of police-state measures against strikers, under conditions of rising popular opposition to mass layoffs, wage and pension cuts, and the gutting of health care and other essential social services, amounts to the criminalization of any effective collective resistance by the working class. Some 39 years after the end of the colonels’ dictatorship in Greece, a de facto strike ban is being re-imposed.

The ruling class is increasingly turning to authoritarian methods to impose the austerity measures dictated by the European Union, which itself is acting as the instrument of the international banks. This turn exposes the falsity of the claims by the trade unions and pseudo-left organizations such as SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) that government policy can be shifted to the left through the exertion of pressure from below.

The Greek ferry workers are set to decide today whether they will extend their strike for a further 48 hours. The strike has brought the state-run ferry service to the islands to a complete standstill, causing supply shortages on the smaller islands that do not have an airport.

The ferry strike and other protests, including escalating blockades by farmers, are aimed against measures agreed last November by parliament as part of the fifth austerity package demanded by the EU. These measures, which are now being implemented, include salary cuts for all public-sector workers as well as the deregulation of shipping. Ferry crews are to be reduced and training requirements lowered. Already, about 7,000 of the 15,000 trained ferry workers are unemployed.

The ferry workers are also demanding payment of outstanding wages. Many have not been paid for

months and cannot feed their families, despite having regular work.

The successive rounds of austerity measures have led to a collapse in the Greek economy, driving up the official unemployment rate to nearly 27 percent. Of the 1.3 million unemployed, about 1 million receive no state support. Even the sugar-coated Eurostat figures show that at least one fifth of the Greek population is living below the poverty line. Some 250,000 people are totally dependent on church kitchens for food. Wages have fallen by up to 60 percent, when they are paid out at all.

The money that is being taken from the workers is flowing directly to major banks and speculators. In response to a reduction of the state deficit by 31.5 percent and increase in the primary surplus last year, the prices of Greek government bonds have shot up. While in February, bonds that fell due in May 2012 were still trading at 14 percent of their nominal value, their market value has now risen to 55 percent. Anyone buying €1,000 worth of bonds last May could sell them seven months later for €4,000.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU are already calling for further cuts to the minimum wage and public-sector wages. Wage increments in reward for years of service are to be terminated. Prime Minister Samaras has already agreed to this and called for the drawing up of the necessary legislation.

Growing sections of the working population are coming into struggle against this massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top. In recent weeks, doctors, nurses, caregivers, university teachers and electrical workers, as well as subway, bus, train and tram drivers, have gone on strike. Farmers are in the second week of protests against the ending of subsidies for fuel and insurance against crop failures, as well as an increase in social security contributions and a reduction in tax refunds. They have been parking their tractors in the thousands at various traffic junctions, threatening to blockade the roads.

“We are standing at the edge of the abyss,” a farmer told Reuters. The protests are already having an impact, causing food shortages and delays in agricultural exports.

Although the government has held talks with farmers’ representatives, it has made clear that it is not prepared to make any concessions that would increase

state spending.

In its crackdown on workers and intransigence in the face of social unrest, the government is relying on the treachery of the major trade union confederations, the private-sector GSEE (General Confederation of Greek Workers) and the public-sector ADEDY (Civil Servants’ Confederation), and their pseudo-left supporters. They have worked from the outset to isolate and help defeat industrial struggles, such as the Athens subway strike, while defusing mass opposition by holding token one-day strikes whose basic purpose is to head off an independent movement of the working class against the government and the ruling class.

When the subway workers were attacked by the police, the unions immediately ended the strike and shortly afterwards called off sympathy strikes. The industrial actions of doctors and nurses were terminated without any concessions from the government. Now the unions are doing nothing to defend the ferry workers.

A 24-hour general strike originally announced by GSEE and ADEDY for the beginning of this month has been postponed to February 20 so as to prevent any broad solidarity action with the ferry workers.

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