

Greece: Tens of thousands of workers protest against the Troika

By Christoph Dreier
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As EU and IMF officials travelled to Athens for new talks on austerity measures, thousands of workers marched against mass layoffs, tax increases and cuts in social spending. A 24-hour strike yesterday paralysed much of the country.

The two major trade union confederations, GSEE and ADEDY, had called for the protest. ADEDY alone spoke of a strike involving 65 percent of its members, nearly 200,000 strikers.

Schools, courts and public offices were closed. Trains and buses remained in their depots, airport employees stopped work for three hours, and hospitals provided only emergency care. Journalists refused to produce the regular news and instead reported only about strikes and protests.

Despite pouring rain, up to 15,000 workers gathered on Syntagma Square in Athens. Although completely soaked, they stood in front of the parliament and shouted slogans such as “No more sacrifices!” and “Don’t give up!”

Just before it was to start, ADEDY and GSEE cancelled the planned protest march to parliament due to the heavy rain. PAME, the trade union federation of the Communist Party (KKE), held a separate march as planned. In Thessaloniki, thousands of workers also demonstrated against the austerity measures.

The 24-hour general strike was the 35th of its kind since the debt crisis began. It was announced weeks ago, strictly limited, and agreed with the government in advance. The cancellation of the demonstration is symptomatic of the attempts by the unions to sabotage protests. Through such limited strikes, ADEDY, GSEE and PAME seek to keep workers’ growing opposition under control. In recent weeks, they have found it increasingly difficult to limit the protests.

On Tuesday, protesters besieged the Treasury, where

the Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras was holding negotiations with representatives of the troika (the EU, IMF, and ECB).

“Take your bailout and go!” the angry crowd shouted at the troika inspectors, as they left the building. Earlier, a man was arrested for pelting the IMF representative Poul Thomsen with coins as Thomsen entered the ministry.

For the last two months, administrative staff at the major universities in Greece has been on strike in protest against government plans for mass dismissals. Students at the University of Athens have demonstrated their solidarity with the workers. They blockaded the entrance of the Ministry of Education with a wall of books.

The workers are opposing the dismissal of 25,000 public employees and being moved into a so-called “mobility reserve.” Those concerned receive reduced remuneration for eight months while they are supposed to find a new job; otherwise they are just thrown out on the street after the deadline.

The expansion of property tax has sparked rage and indignation in large sections of the population. In Greece, this also applies to many workers, who often have small houses or apartments. Many families can stay afloat in the face of poverty only through this limited possession. Now they are being forced to pay the tax, even if they have no income on the property.

Greek society is on the brink of collapse. The cuts dictated by the EU in recent years have led to an unemployment rate of 27 percent.

According to a recent OECD study, average income fell in Greece between 2007 and 2011 by 23 percent. At 34 percent, the number of those who are satisfied with their lives is lower than in any other OECD country (in 2007 it was 59 percent).

The Troika is calling for the immediate implementation of mass sackings and the closure and privatization of state enterprises. In particular, the defence and engineering company EAS is either to be closed or shrunk dramatically.

Otherwise, the troika is threatening to suspend the next tranche of aid of over a billion euros, which Greece needs to pay overdue debts and interest payments. This money goes directly into the accounts of creditors.

In addition to job cuts and privatization, the troika wants to impose so-called structural reforms. In particular, the contribution made by companies to the social security fund benefiting their employees is to be cut by 3.9 percent. This would lead to a deficit of up to 1.1 billion euros, triggering further cuts in benefits.

The EU and IMF also want Athens to commit to further savings in the 2014 budget. The Troika is expecting a funding gap of at least two billion euros, which would be bridged using cuts in pensions and wages. However, the government is expecting to have to find only 500 million euros in additional spending.

Conservative Prime Minister Andonis Samaras (New Democracy, ND), and his social democratic deputy Evangelos Venizelos (PASOK) have said they will not accept further pension and salary cuts. Similar lies have been heard from the government before previous austerity measures were introduced, however; they merely serve to stimulate false hopes and disorient opposition in the working class.

The social devastation has destabilised the political situation in Greece. According to an OECD study, in 2011, only 13 percent of the population expressed trust in their government; in 2007 the figure was 38 percent. The government is increasingly implementing dictatorial measures against protesting workers.

Given the enormous intensification of social conflicts, some EU representatives are seeking to calm things down, without departing from the austerity measures by one iota. On Tuesday, the Economic Committee of the European Parliament discussed the basis for the legitimacy of the troika.

“Who takes the decisions in the Troika and on what basis?” asked conservative Austrian parliamentary deputy Othmar Karas. The committee plans to produce a report on the work of the Troika by next May.

This attempt to defend the EU and its institutions is

supported by various pseudo-left groups across the continent. In Greece, it is especially the largest opposition party, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), which is trying to protect the EU and the government against the anger of the workers.

While workers and students throughout Greece are fighting the austerity measures of the EU, the chair of SYRIZA Alexis Tsipras has travelled once more to the United States to demonstrate his fealty to the IMF.

At a forum at the University of Texas, Tsipras supported the approach of the European Parliament: “We are positive toward this effort and we will contribute to this direction”, Tsipras said. He strictly rejects any notion of leaving the EU and the euro. A SYRIZA government would avoid this in any case, according to the SYRIZA leader.

In the last few weeks, SYRIZA had already made clear that it stands behind the government. In the supposed fight against the fascist party Golden Dawn, SYRIZA has supported the stepping up of the powers of the state apparatus and praises the police, army and the hated government as guarantors of democracy. The party is preparing to take over the reins of government itself and will impose the cuts against the workers using the trade unions and other pseudo-left groups.

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