

Strikes and protests begin in Greece against Syriza austerity programme

By Robert Stevens
7 November 2015

Resistance to the austerity programme of Greece's pseudo-left Syriza government is growing. Over the last week, ferry workers, transport workers, teachers and students have struck and protested against attacks on their working conditions and living standards, cuts in education and other services being imposed by Syriza and the European Union (EU) on behalf of the financial elite.

A 48-hour stoppage by ferry workers that began Monday and ended at 6 a.m. Wednesday had a severe impact, stranding tens of thousands on Greece's islands. The movement of agricultural produce was also hit.

The sailors are members of the Panhellenic Nautical Federation. They are protesting the destruction of their pension fund, pension cuts, plans to reduce the number of people in a ferry crew on passenger ships that will endanger those on board, and cuts to medical and social insurance provision for retired and active sea personnel.

Following a vote to continue the strike, the union almost immediately called off all action, with ferry services returning to normal Friday morning.

On Tuesday evening, Athens Metro, ISAP railway and tram, streetcar and city rail workers held a warning strike to protest the planned merger of their services under one operator as part of a restructuring programme. Staff fear that budget and staff cuts due to the mergers will require outside contractors being employed.

On Monday, high and middle school students from the Attica region protested in Athens against education cuts. They are demanding the hiring of more teachers and increased spending on books and other vital resources. Members of the teachers' trade union OLME walked out in support of the students from

11am to 2pm and joined their rally.

On Thursday, high school and university students protested nationwide against 20 percent cuts in funding to the education budget. As well as in Athens, students demonstrated in the second largest city, Thessaloniki, and the capital of Crete, Iraklion.

Along with increased education funding, students demand the hiring of more teachers and university lecturers. One student protesting in Athens said that at the Technical Educational Institute of Piraeus cuts had resulted in a number of departments ceasing to function.

This week's protests take place ahead of a general strike planned for November 12. The strike was called by the GSEE (private sector) and Adedy (public sector) trade union federations.

Calling the strike, Adedy, which has around 650,000 members, said, "It is clear the government has taken over the role of redistributing poverty."

In truth, it is only thanks to the demobilisation of the working class by the trade union apparatus that Syriza is able to act as enforcers of a further wave of savage cuts in living standards. In the last weeks, Syriza has been finalising, together with EU officials, a raft of cuts to be implemented in exchange for just €2 billion from the total €86 billion three-year loan already agreed.

Early Friday morning, the Greek parliament passed a bill imposing a series of outstanding "prior actions" that must be in place before Athens receives the €2 billion. The measures included lifting obstacles to the sale of Greece's largest port, Piraeus, scrapping tax breaks for farmers, a new system of calculating pensions, and ensuring Greece complies with EU energy efficiency rules.

The bill passed by 153 votes to 118. It was supported by the combined votes of Syriza deputies and those of

its coalition partner, the right-wing Independent Greeks. Making a show of opposition were the deputies of the conservative New Democracy, the fascist Golden Dawn, the social democratic PASOK/DIMAR alliance and the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE).

Ahead of a November 9 deadline, Alexis Tsipras's government must, over the weekend, finalise additional legislation demanded by the EU, including tightening its mortgage rules to allow the evictions of 320,000 Greek households that are in arrears on mortgage payments.

The *Financial Times* commented after the bill's passage, "The finance ministry is seeking a compromise on foreclosures on first homes that would affect thousands of mortgage holders after its first proposal was rejected as too generous by bailout monitors."

The newspaper added, "Even if legislators approve the additional measures at an emergency parliamentary session at the weekend, there are more hurdles ahead for the government. Further cuts in pensions and tax rises for farmers are among the next package of reforms that must be adopted by the end of this month before the Syriza government can pursue talks on debt relief, its policy priority for 2016."

Speaking on behalf of Germany's Finance Ministry, Martin Jaeger said, "The troika [EU, European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund] is examining at the moment how far the Greek side has fulfilled the conditions which are necessary for the next 2 billion [euros] to be paid. There are still considerable gaps that need to be closed."

He warned that no concession would be offered to Greece: "In July, the Greek government made a specific deal with its partners.... There is absolutely no reason to alter our path."

The financial elite are demanding that Tsipras ramp up austerity, with nothing allowed to get in the way.

This year, hundreds of thousands of desperate and poverty-stricken refugees from the war-torn Middle East and North Africa have arrived on the shores of Greece's islands. According to the UN, 218,394 people made the perilous crossing across the Mediterranean Sea last month, with all but 8,000 landing in Greece. A total of 609,000 refugees arrived in Greece this year. More than 350,000 arrived on the island of Lesbos,

which has a population of just 86,000.

The Tsipras government's pleas for EU financial assistance have been given the cold shoulder, however.

Speaking to the media Thursday, European Commissioner Pierre Moscovici said, "The Commission has but one compass—that of the growth and stability pact, and rules should be implemented."

Asked if aid should be forthcoming to Greece and other countries bearing the brunt of the refugee crisis, Moscovici replied, "Concerning Greece, we have another compass, the adoption of the memorandum of understanding and the [austerity] programme. Nothing should make us loosen these reforms."

Workers and youth must take up a fight against the Syriza government, which has demonstrated its determination to force through deeper cuts than those imposed by the previous New Democracy and PASOK government.

No trust can be placed in the trade unions, which face workers and youth as a hostile force. They have spent the last five years facilitating austerity programmes forced through by successive governments. The union officialdom is mainly made up of supporters of Syriza, PASOK, the KKE and myriad pseudo-left parties. The repeated one-day protest strikes they have called have never been in order to mobilise the collective strength of the working class, but only as a means to dissipate anger while cuts are pushed through.

Though Adedy and the GSEE called more than 30 general strikes in Greece since 2010, next week's stoppage is the first general strike they have called in almost a year: They refused to lift a finger as Syriza concluded its austerity agreement with the troika.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>