

Mass one-day strike hits Syriza's austerity measures in Greece

By Robert Stevens
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Up to 50,000 workers marched in Athens Thursday, in a one-day general strike that was one of the biggest mobilisations to protest austerity in Greece in recent years.

The strike testifies to explosive anger in the working class at the austerity policies now being imposed by the Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government. Just over one year after it came to power pledging to oppose the rapacious demands of the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the party hailed by pseudo-left groups internationally is an object of hatred and contempt.

A rally was held in Greece's second city, Thessaloniki, and other cities and towns including Patras, Larissa and the capital of Crete, Iraklion.

The strike, called by the private sector (GSEE) and public sector (Adedy) trade union federations, was in opposition to brutal pension cuts being imposed by Syriza at the behest of Greece's international creditors.

Syriza is committed to slashing pension spending by one percent of GDP (€1.8 billion) this year in order to receive further bailout loans from the European Union (EU). It plans to cut the maximum state pension of €2,700 a month to €2,300 and implement a minimum guaranteed basic pension of just €384. Some pensions could be cut by up to 30 percent, after successive governments have already slashed pensions 11 times since 2010. Syriza is also phasing out additional benefit payments available to pensioners by 2019.

The pension cuts are a central component of the austerity programme Syriza is carrying through. This week, officials for the EU, European Central Bank and IMF "troika" arrived in Athens, meeting Labour Minister George Katrougalos during the strike to discuss the pension cuts at a central Athens hotel heavily guarded by police.

The strike call met with a powerful response. Domestic flights were grounded, most public transport in Athens was paralyzed, with no trolley, train or suburban rail services running, and ferries remained docked in ports. The strike led to the closure of schools, courts and pharmacies, while public hospitals were operating only with emergency staff. Sailors in the PNO maritime trade union joined the strike and will not return to work until Saturday. Self-employed workers including lawyers, notaries, taxi drivers and engineers also struck.

Ahead of the strike, journalists walked out, pulling all news broadcasts off the airwaves. Web sites were left without any updated news, and no print media was published Thursday.

The anger felt by millions of workers, youth and pensioners was palpable at the Athens march. Speaking of his attitude to Syriza, pensioner Nikos Ghinis told Reuters, "They should be strung up here, in Syntagma Square. I'm getting €740 (\$826.21) a month for 40 years of work. ... I'm (demonstrating) here for my children and grandchildren."

A delegation of public sector health workers carried a large banner depicting a hunched-over nurse with a walking stick. It read, "This is retirement at 67"—a reference to the later retirement age Syriza is enforcing.

Syriza responded to growing opposition to its austerity agenda with the same brutality as did the social democratic and conservative governments it replaced. As the march in Athens reached Syntagma Square, riot police attacked protesters with tear gas and stun grenades.

The general strike is the culmination of weeks of protests, during which there have been strikes and demonstrations nearly every day. Sailors have launched a number of prolonged strikes. On January 28, local

government workers occupied town halls during a strike. Earlier in the month, thousands of lawyers marched through Athens during an indefinite strike against the pension cuts.

Over the last 10 days, farmers have repeatedly paralyzed major roads and dozens of others nationwide. Around 6,000 tractors have taken part in the protests, resulting in tailbacks of up to 12 miles at border crossings. Farmers will meet Sunday to discuss widening their protests with the aim of bringing the whole country to a standstill.

The farmers are demanding the government withdraw draft laws on security fund cuts and punitive taxation measures. It is estimated that some farmers could lose up to 80 percent of their income. The tax hikes are being imposed to raise €350 million for Greece's creditors.

Despite its powerful response to a call for opposition to Syriza, the working class still faces immense challenges—above all, drawing the political and strategic conclusions of the bankruptcy of the trade unions and existing “left” parties.

Syriza came to power promising an end to social austerity, and change within the framework of the European Union, then betrayed its promises, imposing continued cuts despite a landslide “no” vote in a referendum on austerity that it had itself organised. The role of the unions—whose officials are largely affiliated to Syriza, the social-democratic Pasok party or the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE)—is no less cynical.

Adedy said of Syriza's plans, “The reactionary bill can and must be blocked though the power of an all-worker popular uprising ...”

The GSSE said, “There is no turning back in the struggle and our demands are non-negotiable; sustainable social security benefits, without cuts, jobs and pensions for generations.”

These are simply lies and empty bluster. The record of the last seven years is irrefutable proof that the unions are hostile to an uprising of the working class and are ready to negotiate virtually any social attack demanded by the EU and the Greek bourgeoisie.

Since the current austerity drive began in Greece, following the election of the 2009 social democratic Pasok government of George Papandreou, the trade unions have called more than 40 general strikes. Their

purpose is to dissipate pent up anger, while the union bureaucracy works to ensure that the austerity measures move ahead. The result has been the greatest assault on workers' living standards in Europe since World War II, apart from the economic collapse that followed the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

Workers need new organisations of struggle and, above all, new political parties in Greece and internationally that arm the working class with a perspective for a revolutionary struggle. The necessary starting point is a study of the record of the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The ICFI statement, *The Political Lessons of Syriza's Betrayal in Greece* (in Greek here) draws the essential lessons of the strategic experience the Greek and international working class has passed through with Syriza.

To the extent that Syriza and the trade unions are successful in blocking opposition to their policies from the left, however, they are paving the way for the political right to exploit mass social desperation in Greece and create a powerful far-right movement.

Greece remains mired in recession, with unemployment still at 25 percent and much higher among young people. The European Commission was forced to acknowledge this week that Greece's economy is the only one in the European Union set to shrink this year.

In the case of the farmers, leadership of the protest has fallen to Kostas Alexandris, one of Greece's most successful farmers. Another key figure in the protest is Stergios Litos, the president of the Independent Farmers of Visaltia, who stood as an MP with New Democracy in January last year. In August, he was part of a delegation from the National Farmers Committee that met with fascist Golden Dawn leader Nikolaos Michloliakos in his parliamentary office.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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