

Greek workers stop work in opposition to Syriza anti-strike and austerity measures

By Robert Stevens
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Thousands of Greek workers demonstrated and carried out strikes on Friday against further austerity measures being imposed by the Syriza government, along with severe restrictions on the right to take industrial action.

Between 10,000 and 20,000 workers protested in Athens at the culmination of a week of strikes and protests. Those on strike for 24 hours included Athens Metro workers, doctors and sailors.

The action shut down the entire Metro rail system, which brought gridlock to the streets of the capital. Ships were unable to sail, while state-run hospitals were forced to rely on reserve staff due to the walkout by doctors.

Among those striking were workers from the GSEE (General Confederation of Greek Workers) private-sector unions as well as from PAME (All Workers Militant Front), the union federation affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece. Banners and placards carried by workers read: “Hands off strikes,” “Uprising!” and “No to modern slavery!”

Speaking to Reuters, retired ship officer George Papaspyropoulos said, “This essentially abolishes the right to strike... Such things happened only during the junta. This government is leftist in name only. In deeds it’s a junta.”

Nikos Papageorgiou, a 50-year-old hotel worker, told the news agency, “Blood was shed by generations that came before us to have the right to strike. Now a so-called left-wing government is trying to abolish it.”

Once again, riot police were mobilised by the Syriza government against workers. As the protesters made their way up the steps to the parliament building in the capital’s Syntagma Square, they were tear-gassed by heavily armed officers.

This week has seen protests by workers who forced

their way into ministry buildings, including the Employment Ministry, where they confronted minister Efi Acharsioglou. Protests were also held outside the heavily guarded official residence of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras.

The anti-democratic measures are the latest to be drawn up by the European Union and the Syriza government to force the Greek population, already bled white by nearly a decade of savage austerity, to endure even greater “sacrifices” to pay off the country’s debt to the banks, which remains at around €300 billion.

The current €86 billion loan, which expires in August, is in return for an austerity programme Syriza is pledged to implement. Greece has received only €40.2 billion of this money. It will get a further tranche of about €4.5 billion only if the government imposes more cuts and privatisations.

Under a multi-purpose bill set to be passed Monday night by Syriza and its coalition partner, the far-right Independent Greeks, family benefits will be further slashed, a new process to speed up foreclosures on overdue loans will be implemented, and draconian measures to restrict strikes will be enacted.

The anti-strike law will overturn a law first enacted in 1982, in the aftermath of the fall of the fascist junta in 1974. It amends the earlier law to set a higher worker participation requirement for strike votes, to be decided at primary union assemblies. The threshold for a strike vote to be legal will be raised from one third to at least 50 percent of all paying union members, not simply those who take part in the vote.

Further strikes are scheduled for Monday by ADEDY (Supreme Administration of Greek Civil Servants Trade Unions) public-sector workers, timed to coincide with the parliamentary vote to be held late in the evening. Among those striking will be public transport

and public hospital workers and air traffic controllers. The latter will hold a three-hour work stoppage between 12pm and 3pm that will affect 48 domestic and international routes on Aegean Air and Olympic Air.

Responding to Friday's protest, government spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos attempted to play down the significance of the latest measures, stating that they would not affect the operations of the highest levels of the bureaucracies of the main trade union federations, the GSEE and ADEDY. "This does not affect (umbrella) unions and it does not change the process followed to called strikes," he said.

Greek governments of all political stripes, from the social democratic PASOK, to the conservative New Democracy and now Syriza, have relied on the union federations to ensure the imposition of austerity over the last decade. They have called some 50 general strikes, for the most part one-day affairs, at regular intervals for the purpose of allowing workers to let off steam while they held talks with the government on implementing the cuts.

For every cent Greece receives in loans from the EU, it must impose even greater attacks on working class living standards. On Friday, *Kathemerini* reported, "The Euro Working Group of euro zone finance ministry officials told Greek representative Giorgos Houliarakis on Thursday that the government has less than a week to finish off the prior actions required for the review to be completed in time for the January 22 Eurogroup meeting."

The Euro Working Group members had received the "600 translated pages of the multi-bill currently being debated in the Greek Parliament, but had not had time to assess the contents" and determine whether its proposals went far enough.

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