

Greek workers protest social attacks by Syriza government

By John Vassilopoulos
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Strikes and protests have taken place this month in Greece against the austerity policies being imposed by the Syriza-led government of Alexis Tsipras in accordance with the demands of the European Union.

A general strike in the public sector was called by ADEDY (Civil Servants' Confederation) on November 14. The strike was the first major action by workers since Syriza exited the EU's "bailout" programme in August, under an agreement that enforces austerity in the country for decades to come. Public-sector workers have seen their pay slashed by 40 percent since 2010 and are demanding an end to a pay freeze and restoration of what are called the 13th and 14th salaries. Despite the huge cuts inflicted on workers, ADEDY demanded only a 2-3 percent pay increase.

A general strike called by the General Confederation of Greek Labour (GSEE) private-sector union federation is set for November 28. The GSEE is calling for the restoration of collective agreements, pay and pensions and making the paltry demand that the minimum wage return to its previous level of €751 a month.

Transport is expected to be hit by the strike, with the Athens metro, the electric railway and the tram network halted. Employees of the ILPAP trolley-bus service will strike, as will workers on OASA buses for part of the day. Ferry workers are backing the strike, with all passenger ferries to be docked nationwide.

So despised is the ruling party that at a November 16 commemoration of the 1973 Athens Polytechnic student uprising against the military junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974, members of a Syriza delegation, including two government ministers, were forced to leave amid angry protests at their presence.

On November 20, dozens of members of the POE-OTA municipal workers union occupied the

Labour Ministry in protest at the death of a refuse worker killed after losing control of the truck he was driving in the early hours of November 16. The accident took place near Athens' main landfill in Fyli on a busy highway located northwest of the city centre.

According to figures released by POE-OTA, since the summer of 2014, 43 municipal workers in Greece have lost their lives in workplace accidents, while 58 have been seriously injured. These deaths and injuries are directly linked to the austerity and anti-labour legislation imposed over the last eight years by successive governments.

The week prior to the November 16 incident, a worker lost his life, and another was badly injured when they were hit by a car while cleaning the sidewalk on the same stretch of road. According to reports, the worker was deaf and dumb and unable to hear the traffic. That a disabled person was compelled to work on such a busy stretch of road for €495 (the net monthly minimum wage), with a complete disregard for his safety, is a testament to the social crisis produced by an eight-year-long assault on living standards and working conditions.

In the last three years, Syriza has implemented brutal attacks on pensions, shifted more of the tax burden onto the working class, attacked the right to strike and overseen the privatisation of state-owned assets such as the Piraeus Port Authority to the Chinese-owned company Cosco. Two years ago, it completed the privatisation and sale of 14 major Greek airports to the German-led consortium Fraport.

In addition, 23 regional airports have been earmarked for privatisation, as well as over 10,000 archaeological sites and museums, many in Crete, in and around the town of Chania. The Keep Talking Greece website reported that in Chania alone, the government is selling

off the “new Archaeological Museum, the archaeological museum located inside the St Francis Church, the National Museum Eleftherios Venizelos, the Historical Archive of Crete, several Venetian and Byzantine moats, fortifications and bastions, as well as properties where important Minoan architectural remains have been discovered.”

On October 11, workers at Greece’s archaeological sites and museums nationwide struck for 24 hours to protest the transfer of public museums and sites to the Privatization Fund. Strikers at the Acropolis in Athens held up a banner reading, “NOT FOR SALE.”

Dozens of token, mainly 24-hour general strikes called by GSEE and ADEDY have been held over the last eight years as a means of letting off steam, while successive governments imposed EU/IMF austerity diktats. These trade union organisations are largely discredited and their inability to maintain control over workers has caused a crisis within the labour bureaucracy. This is especially the case with the All Workers Militant Front (PAME), the trade union allied to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE). As the second largest faction within both GSEE and ADEDY, PAME has historically played the role of a “militant” loyal opposition within the bureaucracy.

The public-sector strike and proposed strike in the private sector were endorsed by PAME, which campaigned for a 24-hour general strike involving both GSEE and ADEDY for November 8, which failed to materialise.

On November 1, workers in a group of eight unions struck in what was dubbed an “inter-sector strike from below.” The unions involved included the SEFK, which covers teachers working in *frontistiria*-- evening cramming schools that prepare high school students for exams, the union of waiters and catering workers (SSM) and the union that represents employees of Nokia. Demands included the reestablishment of collective bargaining and repeal of a recent law allowing the government to adjust the minimum wage by decree, based on the demands of big business for increased “competitiveness.”

The action was presented as an alternative to PAME’s strike proposal and supposedly independent of the discredited GSEE and ADEDY federations and accountable to the rank-and-file memberships of union locals.

In an interview with the *EfSyn* newspaper, Giorgos Christoforou, the head of the union of Nokia Greece employees, declared: “The motivation behind this initiative was the stance of GSEE for the so-called ‘National Day of Action of the Social Alliance’” on May 30. [The Social Alliance includes the Employers’ Federation]. “We then said that this can’t go on. We got sick of waiting for GSEE when they were going to strike together with the employers.”

The strike was endorsed by the Front for Class Overthrow (META), which, while presenting itself as a nonpartisan left-wing trade union faction, was historically aligned to Syriza. Most of its members are now part of a Syriza splinter group, Popular Unity, which advocates a programme of national autarky.

The November 1 action was also endorsed by the pseudo-left Antarsya, in which the Socialist Workers’ Party (SEK) plays a leading role. Antarsya holds most of the seats on the SEFK union’s governing committee. META is headed by Giorgos Charisis, a longstanding senior trade union bureaucrat who was also formerly with Syriza and is now with Popular Unity. In the past, Charisis has served on ADEDY’s governing committee and is currently on the executive council of POE-OTA, the municipal workers’ union.

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