

Greek workers strike back

Strikes must be democratically controlled by unions' ranks

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The announcement by the Greek Pasok government on 7 October of a new bill savaging the jobs and conditions of public sector workers provoked an explosion of struggles, strikes and occupations in almost every part of the public sector in Greece.

The measures, in line with the directives of the 'Troika' - the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU), European Central Bank (ECB) - amount to more huge attacks on the living standards of Greek workers, particularly those who work in the public sector.

According to the government's plans, public sector workers will suffer further wage cuts of 20%-30%. Already, over the last 18 months, workers in the public sector have seen their income fall by an average of 40%, according to the public sector workers' union confederation Adedy.

The fact that thousands of workers, who have loans and mortgages to pay, received wages of between €10, €30 or €40 for the first half of October (mortgages are cut from their wages, before they receive them, through the banking system), shows the scale of the attack.

The declared plans of the 'Troikans' (as they are referred to in Greece and which includes the Pasok government) is to drive down public sector wages to the level of €500 to €550 net, a month.

The government also intends to make 30,000 civil servants 'reserve labour' - a euphemism for job losses - by the end of 2011. These workers will stop working and for the next year will take only 60% of their (already reduced) wages. After that period, "if they don't find a job" - which is more or less certain in the current economic crisis - they will be sacked.

Huge job losses

This means mass layoffs in the public sector. The government intends to extend this measure to include a further 70,000 public sector workers for 2012, but the troika demands that the total number of workers to be sacked is increased to 250,000. The total number of workers in the public sector is less than 700,000. Therefore they want to sack more than one-third of these!

All these huge cuts are in return for the latest (6th) tranche of bailout funds by the IMF and the EU of €8 billion.

But the truth is that the Troikans want also to crush the workers' movement, especially the union organisation in the public sector, which has been the most militant in the last couple of decades.

The social democrat (Pasok) leadership of the unions have discredited the role of trade unions in the eyes of many workers for years because of their bureaucratic manoeuvres and betrayals.

Now their government wants to finish the job by crushing more workers' rights.

Massive anger

These vicious attacks have led to, in recent days, the largest wave of workers' action in the public sector since the beginning of the debt crisis two years ago. The latest action started when a number of union activists in different government

departments occupied ministry buildings and prevented the Troika's officers from entering.

It was certainly a new experience for the highly paid IMF, ECB and EU apparatchiks to have to move from place to place in an attempt to find somewhere to hold meetings!

The change in the mood of civil servants was clearly shown during the general strike called by Adedy on 5 October. The participation in the strike was higher than 85% and the demonstration in Athens was, according to Adedy, the biggest show of strength by the public sector workers since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974.

The announcement of the new cuts' programme by the government, last week, led to a new wave of anger and a tsunami of strikes, protests and occupations in the public sector.

Wave of struggles

Every day, there are massive protests, strikes and working stoppages in different areas. The majority of the government ministries and buildings are occupied by workers. This will culminate in a 48-hour general strike, called by the private and public sector unions, on 19-20 October.

Just taking a walk around the centre of Athens or any of the other big Greek cities is enough for anyone to see the situation on the ground: the streets are full of garbage because of a strike by refuse workers, which is in its second week.

Many government buildings are

closed and decorated with a banner saying, "occupation!" Nearly every day there is a demonstration by some sector of the workforce.

This situation and the combative mood amongst rank and file workers are pressing the leadership of the unions to take more decisive action. Adedy, was compelled to change its initial call for a 24-hour strike, on 19 October, to a 48-hour general strike on 18-19 October.

Then, the private sector and public utilities union confederation, the GSEE, also changed its initial call for a 24-hour general strike and now calls for 48-hour action.

A number of union federations, led by Pasok, have been forced to call for important industrial action. For example, the leadership of the primary school teachers union proposed to its local branches to go on "indefinite strike action" and also called on Adedy to organise an indefinite general strike in the public sector.

Many rank and file local union branches are passing similar resolutions, asking the union federations, in the public and private sectors to hold repeated general strikes.

Perhaps the most important development is the decision of 23 trade union federations in the wider public sector (including public utility companies) to co-ordinate their action against the government, particularly given the refusal of the two union federations to call for this action.

As well as that, a number of trade unions, where the left play a leading

role, have called a meeting on 16 October to co-ordinate all strike action. Formally speaking, nearly 200 trade unions are represented in this first major attempt at co-ordination of struggle from below on a mass level.

Democratic control

It is clear that even if at the present time the leadership of the unions (especially in the public sector) appears to be combative, workers do not and cannot trust them. If we want to continue and intensify the struggle, workers need to control it democratically.

This is clear from the fact that in quite a number of workplaces the decision to go into industrial action, by assemblies of the rank and file workers was taken against the will of the union leaderships.

In every workplace it is necessary to democratically organise the struggle by electing committees controlled by workers. This is the only way to conduct a successful struggle and to keep a check on the leadership.

The workers' movement in Greece is at a critical point. We could see, over the next days, a workers' movement which will escalate its struggles, put enormous pressure on the unions' leaderships and even cause the Pasok government to fall. We could also see more betrayals by leaderships, as they retreat after gaining just minor concessions, or even no gains at all, from the government.

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The Committee for a Workers' International

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The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

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Xekinima (the CWI in Greece) calls for:

- Follow the 19/20 October 48-hour general strike with a three-day general strike the following week
- For workers' action in every public sector workplace: every public sector union federation to call repeated two-three day strikes, on a weekly basis, linking this to indefinite occupations of ministries, city halls, public buildings, etc, and towards all-out indefinite action by all sections of workers, if necessary, to decisively halt all cuts and attacks
- Co-ordinate and develop the different struggles, with the common aim of bringing down the government
- For full democratic organisation of the workers' movement, based on elected rank and file committees leading the struggles
- Link these struggles to political demands, including refusal to pay the debt and nationalisation of the banks under workers' democratic control and management, as part of a socialist programme to get rid of the barbarism of capitalism and to plan the economy for the benefit of the majority, instead of for huge profits for a handful of bankers and multinationals

Xekinima fights for the building of a mass, democratic political force, based on the struggles taking place and on the programme above, which can channel the discontent and radicalisation of workers and youth to struggle for a socialist alternative - for a government of working people, the poor and youth - in opposition to the growing misery of life under Greek and Troika capitalism.