

Greek government mobilizes riot police to break Athens subway strike

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The Greek government has declared martial law and mobilized riot police to break the nine-day strike by Athens subway workers. As of this writing, it appears that subway service has been partially restored and at least some of the striking workers have returned to work under threat of prosecution and up to five years in prison.

However, bus and tram service has been halted by rolling strikes called by unions in sympathy with the subway workers. The subway workers' union, SELMA, has, according to some news reports, instructed its members to return to work, but it is not clear to what extent such orders are being heeded by rank-and-file workers.

The subway workers, who are resisting massive wage cuts being imposed as part of a restructuring of civil service wages, defied a court ruling handed down Monday night declaring the strike illegal. On Thursday, the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras of the right-wing New Democracy (ND) party invoked emergency powers, in effect declaring martial law and conscripting the strikers into the armed forces in order to force them back to work. The other parties in the coalition are the social democratic Pasok and the Democratic Left, a right-wing split-off from the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza).

Just before 4 AM Friday, some 300 riot police broke into the Sepolia depot in western Athens, which was being occupied by 90 striking workers. Rows of police blocked off surrounding roads to keep hundreds of strike supporters away while other police removed the strikers from the depot.

Although the workers did not resist, at least ten were arrested and one female worker was injured, according to Reuters. The police then locked down the depot,

allowing only strike-breakers to enter.

The “civil mobilization” law used to attack the strike is supposedly intended for use only in case of a natural disaster, a massive danger to public health or the outbreak of war. Since the end of the Greek colonels' dictatorship in 1974, it has been invoked only nine times—including three times in the last three years. In 2010 it was used to force striking lorry drivers back to work and in 2011 it was used against sanitation workers.

The use of dictatorial laws and state violence amounts to the criminalization of any form of collective resistance by workers to the vicious and ongoing assault on their jobs and living standards. This attack, now in its fourth year, is being carried out under the auspices of the European Union and implemented by the Greek ruling class to satisfy the demand of the Greek and international banks that the full cost of the capitalist crisis be born by the working class.

In justifying the emergency measures, Transport Minister Costis Hadzidakis (ND) declared that the strike was “unreasonable.” He said it was “causing difficulties” and “a serious financial problem for the city”. This is a formula for declaring illegal any effective industrial action by the working class.

Prime Minister Samaras has made clear that the strike-breaking assault is directed not only against the subway workers, but against all resistance by workers to the austerity program. On Thursday, he said the trade unions did not have the right to strike in such a way as to “torment the people from morning to night.”

It is, of course, the government, acting on behalf of the bourgeoisie, that is tormenting the people by destroying jobs, wages, pensions and social services. Workers have no right to resist this, according to Samaras, while the government has an unlimited

“right” to attack them.

The subway workers’ strike is directed against the fifth round of austerity measures, passed by parliament on November 8 on the orders of the “troika”—the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. The new austerity package includes a further 25 percent public-sector wage cut, on top of wage cuts of up to 60 percent imposed over the past three years.

The subway workers took repeated strike action over a number of weeks until they launched an indefinite strike on January 17. Strikes have also been underway in the health service and on the docks.

There is broad support for the subway strikers in the working class. On Friday morning, when the police attacked the Sepolia depot, hundreds of people quickly gathered at the gates in solidarity with the workers. The police had difficulty preventing the crowd from coming to the aid of the strikers.

Railway workers, as well as bus and tram workers, spontaneously went on strike. Protest actions are reportedly planned for the weekend.

However, the trade unions are doing everything they can to prevent a widespread mobilisation of the working class. They have limited the strikes by rail workers to just four hours and insisted that no strike action be taken during rush hour. The unions have also limited the current sympathy strikes to 24 hours.

Over the past four years, the unions have systematically sabotaged workers’ resistance to the austerity measures. They have coordinated every 24-hour strike with the government and organised protests in such a way as to minimize “financial problems.” When the unions have been unable to direct workers’ anger into harmless channels, the government has declared martial law, as against the lorry workers and sanitation workers. The unions have refused to mobilize the working class to defend these strikers.

The symbiotic relationship between the state and the trade unions is covered over by the various pseudo-left groups such as the Cooperation of the Anti-capitalist Left for the Overthrow (Antarsya) and Syriza. Although both have condemned the declaration of martial law, they are attempting prevent any mobilisation by workers against it.

A press spokesman for Antarsya told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Antonis Stamatopoulos, a

subway workers’ strike leader and Antarsya member, had not called for a continuation of the strike, but wanted instead to wait for votes to be held at rank and file meetings at the weekend.

As soon as workers seek to mobilize their industrial strength to defend their basic social rights, they come into conflict not only with the state, but also with the official unions and the pseudo-left allies of the union bureaucracy.

The use of martial law and the brutal attack on striking workers demonstrate that the ruling elite is prepared to use the most brutal methods to suppress growing popular opposition to the dictates of the banks. They make clear that the interests of the corporate-financial elite are totally incompatible with the interests of the majority of the population.

Just as Greece is a test case for the European Union in destroying the social conditions of the working class throughout Europe, it is also becoming a model for the introduction of authoritarian forms of rule.

The only answer to this ruling class assault is the independent mobilisation of the entire Greek and European working class. This requires a break with the unions and the pseudo-left groups and the development of a socialist and internationalist movement to put an end to the European Union and replace it with workers’ governments and the United Socialist States of Europe.



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