

Social conflicts intensifying in Greece

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Social conflicts are intensifying in Greece. The government has growing problems enforcing planned redundancies in the face of mounting working class resistance, and is increasingly resorting to authoritarian methods. The European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are once again demanding further spending and job cuts.

Eight universities have now been closed for five weeks after workers went on strike to oppose the dismissal of 1,349 administrative staff. Four of the eight university directors have refused to submit to the Education Ministry lists of employees with the information necessary to implement their sackings. The remaining four submitted lists of names without including any further details.

The Education Ministry responded aggressively to the directors' action. It described Greek universities as "places of lawlessness, waste and mismanagement"—formulations that can be easily used to commence legal action against staff and the directors. On Thursday, the Ministry instructed university staff to forward the missing information directly to the authorities. In the event of continued refusal, they are threatened with immediate dismissal.

The union for the private sector, the GSEE, has called another 24-hour general strike for November 6. The strike is directed at plans to increase the country's property tax. The tax applies in Greece to many workers who often have small apartments or houses.

Greek hospital workers are also opposing the dismissal of employees and the closure and merger of hospitals. Eight hospitals began strike action this week that will initially continue over the weekend. On Monday, the workers will decide at a general meeting on how to proceed further.

The Greek health system is already on the verge of collapse. Hospitals lack the most basic materials, and 40 percent of workers in Greece have no health insurance. Also, a new law comes into force on January 1 that requires the insured to pay €25 per treatment in the hospital.

The mass layoffs are part of the terms of the last loan agreement agreed on with the troika of the IMF, the European Commission and European Central Bank (ECB). According to the agreement, the government must transfer 25,000 workers into a so-called mobility reserve, where they will receive a portion of their salary for a few months before being finally sacked. The layoffs are part of a plan to shed a total of 150,000 jobs by the end of 2014.

The government has repeatedly delayed mass layoffs in the public sector because it feared the reaction of workers. It has cut wages and benefits, and increased taxes, but so far refrained from carrying out layoffs. Against a background of massive social cuts, the security of public service jobs, which is actually enshrined in the Constitution, was one of the last remaining social gains that ensured a degree of social stability.

Unemployment in Greece reached a new high in July of this year, standing at 27.6 percent. The rate amongst young workers under 25 is well over 60 percent. Under these circumstances, dismissed nurses, administrative staff and caretakers will find it impossible to find new work. After one year of unemployment, all forms of state support come to an end, including health insurance.

In the midst of this extremely tense situation, the troika is demanding even more cuts. Late last month, troika inspectors left their country and delivered the government an ultimatum: either the government carries out its planned redundancies and submits a budget for 2014—all by the end of October—or the next tranche of aid of over a billion euros will once again be held back.

The IMF has now indicated that Greece will need new emergency loans next year. According to its calculations, the state will experience a shortfall of at least €6.6 billion (US\$8.9 billion) between 2014 and 2016 due to its poor economic development. Covering this deficit will require further cuts and loans. Moreover, given the country's high level of debt, a "haircut" for the country's creditors is also envisaged.

The head of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM),

Klaus Regling, believes that Greece will need a fresh loan in 2014. The current programme involving loans totalling €240 billion ends in the middle of next year. These loans flow almost exclusively into the coffers of creditor banks that receive high rates of interest for their deposits of government bonds, while the working class pays for the whole transaction in the form of further cuts and layoffs.

Greek prime minister Andonis Samaras (New Democracy, ND) and his vice minister, Evangelos Venizelos (PASOK), have so far ruled out “new measures” to balance the budget, but similar statements have not prevented cuts in the past. Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras has already stated that there could be more “structural reforms”—i.e., measures such as the reduction of workers’ rights, the extension of working hours, and tax breaks for the rich.

Such attacks are incompatible with democratic norms. To enforce its policies against workers, the ruling class has resorted with increasing frequency to dictatorial measures. Already this year, striking workers have been placed under martial law and forced to return to work on three separate occasions.

The imposition of martial law on subway drivers who organised a strike 10 months ago still remains in force. For almost a year, they have worked under the status of military conscripts. Unexcused absence can be punished with imprisonment of up to five years. When workers sought to discuss this measure at a staff meeting on Thursday, management obtained an interim injunction forbidding the meeting.

The most powerful expression of the authoritarian tendencies of the state apparatus is the systematic development of the fascist Golden Dawn party by the police and army. It was only after the assassination of the leftist hip-hop musician Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn thugs and the eruption of mass protests threatening the authority of the state that the government decided to rein in the fascists and arrest some of its leading representatives.

Now, having been strengthened in the process, the state apparatus is proceeding against the social resistance of the working class. At the same time, the fascist cliques remain functional and continue to work closely with the security authorities.

The measures taken against Golden Dawn serve as a justification for the suppression of protests and demonstrations. In parliament, Prime Minister Samaras listed various social protests and called for their suppression. “A democratic party cannot make

distinctions between good and bad violence, and I call on all parties to unconditionally defend the legal system”, he said.

On Thursday, *Avgi*, the party newspaper of SYRIZA, reported that following its measures against Golden Dawn, the government was planning to take measures against “social movements” and prosecute them as criminal organisations. At a certain point, the same measures could be used against SYRIZA itself. In addition there is evidence that, on behalf of the government, the Greek secret service is tapping the phones of the party and spying on leading members.

Despite these developments, SYRIZA actively supports the strengthening of the state apparatus in its alleged campaign against Golden Dawn. It has praised the police and army as anti-fascist and a force for democracy while at the same time calling upon the ruling conservative New Democracy to form a common front.

SYRIZA speaks on behalf of affluent sections of the middle class, and is itself closely linked to the state apparatus. The organisation fears an independent movement of the workers far more than the fascist gangs or their supporters in the police.

On Thursday, the ethics committee of the Greek parliament, in which all parties are represented, called for the lifting of immunity of 6 of the 18 Golden Dawn deputies. In addition, a draft law was discussed that withdraws state funding from parties whose representatives are accused. The funds are only to be reimbursed after a potential acquittal.

SYRIZA supported the bill in principle and merely proposed a few amendments to ensure that funding is withdrawn only if the party leader himself, or at least half of the leadership of the party, is convicted of forming a criminal organisation. Further debate on the law is scheduled for next Thursday.



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