

General strike in Greece to demand higher pay and end to austerity

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Workers throughout the public and private sector mounted a general strike against the New Democracy (ND) government in Greece on Wednesday. The main demand of the strike, after over a decade of crippling austerity, was an end to a cost-of-living crisis making it impossible for millions to get by.

The walkout was called by the private sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and its public sector counterpart ADEDY, representing several million workers. The All Militant Workers Front (PAME), affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), mobilised its membership.

The strike took place amid a rise in industrial action and protests in Europe. On Thursday rail workers are striking in France to demand an increase in wages and against the break-up of the SNCF rail network into private subsidiaries.

Public transport in Greece was grounded, with the Athens Metro suspended and train services hit. Ferries connecting Greece's islands with the mainland were unable to leave port.

Hospitals were functioning with a skeleton staff and provided only emergency service. Healthcare facilities have been decimated by austerity, shrinking by 40 percent compared to 2009, and operating with only half the staff they once had. Meanwhile, private healthcare groups are reaping huge profits.

Teachers, who held a national strike last month defying an attempt to ban their action, participated, and nurseries shut for the day. Government offices were fully closed.

In order that they could cover the general strike, journalists at the main media outlets held their own 24-hour strike Tuesday, taking all news broadcasts off the air.

Thousands marched in Athens to gather outside the parliament building in Syntagma Square, as well as in Greece's second city Thessaloniki and other major urban areas. Among their chants and slogans on banners were "Workers' rights are the law"; "Collective contracts and wage increases that's the workers' response"; "Give money to health and education, out of NATO's slaughterhouse";

"You work 12 hours a day for 400 euros [a month], it's not the immigrant who is at fault but the boss"; "Money for health, money for education, not for war and the police"; and "General strike against rising prices".

The banner in the X posting above reads: "Wars are legal-Super profits are legal-The crime at Tempi was legal-Only strikes are illegal-We will not submit"

There was a heavy riot police presence.

Speaking to Reuters in Athens, court employee Stratis Dounias said, "Each time we go to the supermarket and each time electricity bills land, we suffer small heart attacks. We want real measures against the high prices."

Pensioner Giorgos Skiadiotis said, "Today we are demanding that the government gives us back what they and the previous governments took from us in the last decade. Our buying power has been reduced by 50 percent, inflation affects everything."

Workers' pay in Greece remains 14 percent lower than it was in 2011. The latest figures from the European Statistical Service (EUROSTAT) show that the average annual adjusted full-time salary for workers in the European Union (EU) in 2023 was €37,900. For workers in Greece it was €17,000, third from the bottom after Bulgaria and Hungary.

The Mitsotakis government boasts that it has raised the minimum monthly gross wage four times since taking office in 2019. But these increases have been nowhere near enough; the minimum wage today is still only €830 (\$875) per month. The government has pledged to increase this to a still-low €950, but not until three years from now in 2027.

Monday's action follows months of strikes and protests by workers demanding higher pay and that collective wage agreements—done away with during a decade of austerity imposed by successive governments—are restored.

The demands of public sector workers reveal the massive onslaught on their living standards since 2010. They call for a 10 percent salary increase, collective labour agreements, abolition of a 2 percent unemployment levy, an increase in the tax-free allowance to €12,000, an increase in hazard pay and the reinstatement of the 13th and 14th-month salaries.

Among recent strikes and protests was the courageous action by dockers who last month blocked a 21-ton Israeli ammunition shipment at Piraeus Port destined for Haifa, which was to be used to further the genocide of the Palestinians.

Demands are growing among workers and youth that funding be made available for health, education and services and not increased military spending. Greece's military bases are a key component of NATO's war with Russia, and it squanders over 3 percent of GDP on the military under conditions of widespread poverty throughout society.

In the lead-up to the strike, tens of thousands of middle and high school students demonstrated on November 4 in opposition to teacher shortages, chanting demands to end the genocide in Gaza.

On Sunday, tens of thousands of protesters marched in Athens to commemorate the 51st anniversary of the Athens Polytechnic student uprising against Greece's military junta which ruled from 1967-74. Protesting Israel's genocide in Gaza, the demonstration marched past the US and Israeli embassies. A huge police presence was mobilised with 5,700 cops, including riot squads, deployed across the city and drones and helicopters monitoring from above. The uprising was also commemorated with rallies in Thessaloniki, Patras and Iraklio, Crete.

New Democracy was the undeserved beneficiary of social anger in the last election, as millions abandoned Syriza. The pseudo-left party, which is on the verge of collapse, bears responsibility for every attack on the working class ND has been able to impose after winning the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

So brutal has been its attack on workers living standards that Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was able to announce at a Bloomberg event on Monday that Greece will accelerate plans to repay billions of euros in loans it received in exchange for its austerity measures. The government aims to repay at least €5 billion (\$5.3 billion) in 2025, with Mitsotakis bragging, "We've been ruthlessly focused on fiscal discipline... It's an indication of the confidence we have in our public finances."

Whenever the trade union bureaucracy call a general strike in Greece, it is a sure sign that they fear an escalation of the class struggle that could spiral out of their control. Wednesday's strike was the second this year, with the GSEE and ADEDY calling one in April over low wages and rising joblessness. While unemployment has fallen from record highs it is still above 10 percent, and not expected to fall to 8.5 percent until 2028.

Between 2010 and the end of 2015, the GSEE held 28 general strikes (20 lasting 24 hours and four lasting 48 hours) with some in coordination with its counterparts in

ADEDY. Their purpose was to provide workers a few hours' to let off pent-up anger, after which the union leaderships proceeded to ensure that austerity was implemented. The cuts of these years were imposed by governments led by the social democratic PASOK and ND.

From 2015, the most brutal austerity of all was imposed by a partnership between Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) and the unions. Between 2015 and 2019, seven comprehensive austerity packages were enforced by Syriza. These included 450 individual measures, including countless cuts in pensions, reductions in wages, redundancies, tax hikes and budget cuts across the public welfare, education and health sectors.

The GSEE bureaucracy laid on the rhetoric ahead of Wednesday's general strike, but their statements on the dire situation facing the working class only served as an indictment of their record. GSEE President Yannis Panagopoulos said, "Private sector workers went through hell in the era of the [European Union/ International Monetary Fund] memoranda, had a tough time in the era of the [COVID] public health crisis and an even tougher time today, when the cost of living is sky high, because our wages are rock bottom, because finding a place to live is a pipe dream and it seems that some people do not listen to the voice of society."

All he proposed was further negotiations with the class-war ND government, which is busy abolishing labour laws going back decades, as it facilitates the rapacious demands of the capitalist class and the military.



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