

The Economic Crisis: Class Struggles Heat Up in Greece

By [Dimitris Fasfalis](#)

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Workers in Greece today stand in the forefront of the converging European class struggles against big capital's attempt to make working people pay the costs of its crisis.

Mobilizations against this austerity drive are spreading across Europe. In France, strikes and demonstrations were held on May 27 and a day of actions is planned for June 24. In Portugal, 300,000 working people demonstrated in the streets of Lisbon on May 30 to express their rejection of the socialist government's austerity plan. In Spain, public employees took to the streets on June 2. In Italy, a national demonstration was held in Rome on June 5, with strikes and other actions planned up to June 14. In Great Britain, the unions and left-wing organizations are organizing a day of demonstrations on June 22. In Romania public employees took to the streets on June 4.

The ongoing resistance in Greece shows labour activists and militants of the anti-capitalist left that their struggles can create new paths forward in determining the outcome of the present economic crisis. The latest 24-hour general strike in Greece, held on May 20, registered a success of the labour movement in overcoming the propaganda campaign of the mass media and the slanders coming from the PASOK (Pan-Hellenic Socialist) government. More than 50,000 people took to the streets in Athens and demonstrations were held in the country's major urban centres.[1] Public school teachers took part massively in the Athens demonstration. The participation in the strike was very high in the public sector but less so in the private. The major trade union federations also organized a day of meetings on June 5. This fight is far from over.

The May 20 General Strike

The general strike and demonstrations on May 20 were an overwhelming success. Launched by the General Confederation of Workers in Greece (GSEE) and the state employees' trade-union (ADEDY), the appeal to cease work for 24 hours was observed massively by both public and private-sector workers. Demonstrations were held in all the major cities across Greece except Larissa: in Tripoli and Patra in the Peloponnese, in Ioannina and Igoumenitsa in Epirus, in Herakleion (Crete), and also in Salonika, the metropolis of Northern Greece, where thousands of demonstrators took to the streets.

It is in Athens, however, where the largest demonstrations were seen. The streets of central Athens were taken over by a human flood of some 250,000 citizens. Its components reflected the working class of the Greek metropolis in all its diversity: workers of the private sector, such as those of the Skaramanga shipyards of the Piraeus, workers of the public utilities and the state, such as those of the electricity company (DEI), the teachers and the

nurses of the public health system, unemployed and retired workers, immigrant and undocumented workers, university and high-school students. The slogans coming from the ranks of the demonstration all expressed the people's refusal to pay the costs of the capitalist crisis triggered by global finance: "No to the anti-workers tempest," "No to flexibility, yes to the 35-hour workweek," "Workers, arise! They're taking everything we got," "We paid their profits, we will not pay their crisis." [2]

Thirty-year old Johanna demonstrated to "say no to the IMF. They want to make us believe that they had to come here [to "rescue" state finances], but I do not believe it in the least. Who would accept such treatment?"

A profound feeling of injustice is driving the crowd's protests. Yannis, a thirty-year old professor, explained to *l'Humanité* reporter:

"Everyone feels that there is no justice. The money is there but they do not want to go and get it... I do not see another way out: they offered us only one option." [3]

The stakes of the movement against the IMF/European Union/Greek PASOK government austerity plan were explained by Ilias Vretakou, vice-president of the ADEDY union:

"We're sending from Athens a message of struggle and resistance to workers of all the European countries, against the barbarism of capital markets, governments and the European Union. The government, the IMF and the European Union have decided to drive the workers, and Greek society, to the most savage social barbarism that we have ever known. They're levelling workers and society down to the bottom. They're stealing our wages, they're stealing our pensions, they're stealing our social rights, they're stealing our right to life. They're imposing the law of the jungle in work relations,... reducing the wage rate for extra hours. They make it possible for employers to lay off an older employee and hire, with the same money, three or four young workers under precarious conditions." [4]

This speech drew enthusiastic applause from the crowd that had just booed away the GSEE leader Panagopoulos, criticized by rank-and-file unionists for reluctance to fight the austerity measures in February. [5] Among the other speakers, Claus Matecki (of the German union DGB) and Paul Fourier (of the French General Confederation of Workers) also aroused vivid applause, especially when the latter declared: "Today, we're all Greeks! Thank you and good luck." [6]

Among the political forces of the Left, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) participated massively in the protests. The social-democrats (PASOK) did not have an organized presence, despite internal stirrings among the left-wing of the party in face of the austerity plan implemented by the PASOK government.

Many among the demonstrators voted PASOK in October 2009. They are now disappointed and angry to find out that the triumphant Left that drove out of government the right-wing corrupt government of Kostas Karamanlis (New Democracy) gave in, without any fight whatsoever, to the neoliberal politics of finance capital. Dimitra, a retiree residing in the Athens region, hoped that the PASOK victory would "make things better." Disappointed, she's furious when she thinks of PASOK Prime Minister George Papandreou: "When I think that I've voted for this moron!" [7]

Media coverage of the May 5 demonstrations was centred on the “koukouloforoi,” the “masked ones,” who physically attacked symbols of market mass culture and finance capitalism. The Marfin bank on Stadiou street in downtown Athens was attacked by Molotov cocktails and burned. Three employees of the bank lost their lives in the fire. The Marfin staff were compelled to work that day despite the call to strike and were literally locked into the bank. There was no emergency exit plan, making their evacuation all the more difficult.

The response of the labour movement was immediate and crystal clear. In the evening of May 5, the ADEDY president explained that these “fascist practices aim to scare people at a time when mass struggle is necessary to halt the measures that throw the life of Greeks into hardship.”[8] The following day, May 6, a mourning crowd gathered at Syndagma Place, in front of the Bouli (Greek Parliament), to denounce the adoption of the austerity plan by the elected representatives of the National Assembly.[9]

This spark of street violence is not unrelated to popular exasperation toward the Papandreou government. The austerity plan imposed on the Greek people by the financial markets – the leading financial institutions, the IMF, and the European Union – is a blatant denial of national sovereignty and democracy. Furthermore, the government has stood its ground since February and refuses to heed the message echoing from the streets. Instead, it heightens the authoritarianism of the austerity plan: once it has been adopted by the National Assembly on May 6 (by the votes of the PASOK socialists, of New Democracy and the nationalist-racist LAOS), it will be implemented through a series of orders from the Finance Ministry, leaving no room for parliamentary interference and limiting the elected representatives of the people to a purely formal advisory capacity.

The plan’s lack of democratic legitimacy thus opens the door, in some components on the fringes of the social movement, for concepts of the legitimacy of street violence (clashes with the police, burning of various symbols of the capitalist order, etc.). The party of the capitalist order headed by PASOK has thus as a corollary the violence of the “koukouloforoi” in the mobilizations. Quite apart from the “masked ones,” the blatant authoritarian drive of the austerity measures nourishes an acute anti-parliamentarian tendency within sections of the workers’ movement. Slogans such as “Let it burn!” or “Give the thieves to the people!” were shouted several times in the demonstration. Dozens of demonstrators have also attempted to cut through the security lines of Parliament, before being violently pushed off by police forces.[10]

Looking Before and After May 5

The May 5 actions registered a success because they were prepared: the united mass mobilization was not a spontaneous response, but rather the result of three months of mobilizations by workers’ unions. As early as February 24, the union movement engaged itself in fighting the announced austerity plan, thus denying the ruling class and its spokespersons a monopoly of information and politics. It is precisely that criticism, carried out through actions in the streets and workplaces, which has allowed the social movement to communicate possible scenarios other than the one written by finance capital. Hence, the reactionary and demobilizing notion that this plan is a necessary evil has been shaken, opening the way for a popular counterattack.

On February 24, the first general strike responded to the austerity measures announced by the government. In Athens, 45,000 persons were in the streets; in Salonika, there were 10,000. In the Athens demonstration, Dimitri, a 28-year old civil engineer, explained the

reasons of the mobilization: “We want a job, decent wages and a true social insurance system. Our country has to respect European Union norms which are unfair.”[11] A second 24-hour general strike took place on March 11 coupled with demonstrations in the country’s main cities.

The 24-hour general strikes (February 24, March 11, May 5 and May 20) were without a doubt the most visible examples of the popular mobilizations against austerity. But other actions, more limited in scope, have played a crucial role in building up a momentum and ensuring continuity in the resistance movement. Fabien Perrier, reporter of the French Communist Party daily *l’Humanité*, underlined the atmosphere of social agitation that took hold of Athens in the end of April: “In Athens, each day, the streets are echoing the shouts of demonstrators and of angry professional bodies.”[12]

Many of these mobilizations helped to prepare for the general strike. For instance, on March 5 mass meetings were held in many cities to build the general strike of March 11. The meeting in Volos (a city on the coast of Thessaly, north of Athens) brought together not only unionists but also laid-off METKA workers, preceding a solidarity concert of many artists. In the same manner, May 1 boosted the mass mobilizations before the May 5 general strike. The state employees’ union (ADEDY) called state employees to strike from May 4 for the same reason. Its call was followed, and demonstrations were held on that day.

These limited mobilizations also allowed the labour movement to engage the battle to win over public opinion. Many actions thus responded to the government at each turn of the crisis. Hence, when George Papandreou held a press conference on April 25 to announce he would trigger the European mechanism of financial support, hundreds of demonstrators responded in the streets of downtown Athens shouting: “The struggle of the people will destroy the IMF slaughterhouse.”[13] Two days later, on April 27, civil servants were striking and teachers were camping on Syndagma Place, in front of Parliament, to denounce the bleeding suffered by the public education system. In the meantime, Piraeus harbour was blocked by a 24-hour strike of seamen following the call of their union, the PNO.

Step by step, what seemed inevitable in the minds of the majority became a question to be settled by the relationship of forces. An opinion poll of the Greek newspaper *To Vima* estimated the proportion of those against the reduction of wages at 79.5% of the population.[14] Within the social movement, participants are gaining in confidence, and the idea that the outcome of the struggle is not yet settled is gaining ground. Despina, 27 years old, didn’t take part in the May 4 demonstrations of public employees. She underlined however to the *Humanité* reporter that “those who are on the move are right: they have understood the stakes of this movement. The civil servants are the first [direct victims of austerity measures]; but all of Greece is going to suffer. The unions are united, and the government is starting to shake.”[15]

Every progressive-minded person hails Greek labour’s resistance to the dictatorship of finance capital. The mobilizations of the past three months have been worthy of the political legacy of the struggle against the junta dictatorship (1967-1974) and of the earlier resistance to fascism. Many crucial questions are yet to be settled.

First of all, the strategy followed by the union leadership is open to question. In the face of a government which refuses to heed the protests of the people in the streets, and moreover compels parliament to implement measures dictated from big business, isn’t there a risk that repeated 24-hour strikes could become proof of the movement’s powerlessness to

change the course of events? The labour movement in France suffered a demoralizing setback in the spring of last year after three rounds of 24-hour general strikes. The outcome of events is not yet decided in Greece.

But time could be on labour's side, provided that its leaders have the necessary boldness. How long, for instance, could the PASOK government and its European counterparts hold on in face of an unlimited general strike led by general assemblies of the mass movement?

A second question relates to the social movement's organizational framework. Will it be able to unite into a single voice or platform? Will it be able to establish a democratic and unifying organ speaking in the name of its different components in the streets and ensuring autonomous control of its mobilizations?

These questions seem crucial since they will determine during the coming months the success or failure of labour's attempt to give birth to new possibilities and thus fight off the fatality of neoliberal barbarism. The stakes are high: the immediate future of the social state is being decided today in the streets of Athens. •

Dimitris Fasfalis is from Quebec, and is now living in Paris. An earlier version of this article was published in French under the title: "[La résistance sociale en Grèce: bilan et perspectives](#)." It has been translated and updated by the author. This article published in conjunction with [Socialist Voice](#).

Notes

1. See "[Grèce, après la grève](#)" by Andreas Sartzekis.
2. *Avgi*, May 6.
3. *L'Humanité*, May 6.
4. *Avgi*, May 6.
5. The first strike against the austerity measures was launched by the state employees' ADEDY on February 11 while the GSEE top leadership refused to join their forces, arguing that the interests of private sector workers were not endangered by the government's announcements. It is useful to underline that Panagopoulos is a member of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) headed by Prime Minister George Papandreou. In face of the mounting pressure from the ranks, GSEE leaders rallied with the ADEDY February 24 during the first 24-hour general strike. *L'Humanité*, May 6.
6. *L'Humanité*, May 6.
7. *L'Humanité*, May 11.
8. *Avgi*, May 6.
9. *Avgi*, May 7.
10. *Avgi*, May 6.
11. *L'Humanité*, February 25.
12. *L'Humanité*, April 27.
13. *Avgi*, April 25.
14. *L'Humanité*, May 5.
15. *L'Humanité*, May 5.

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