

Austerity and anger in Greece

APOSTOLIS KASIMERIS, one of the leaders of the OASA bus workers' union in Athens, spoke at the recent National Shop Stewards Network conference in London. Below is an extract of his speech.

Over the last two years, the Greek working class has faced a massive attack on its living standards and rights. It has been an unprecedented attack, worse even than that faced by the British working class at the time of Margaret Thatcher.

The Social-Democratic government of Pasok, together with the EU (European Union) and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), have cut the basic net monthly wage from €670 (£590) to €520 (£458). Our salaries are lower but the cost of living in Greece is no lower than that in Britain.

In the public sector, where wages are supposed to be better than the private sector, we have seen our wages cut by 30% on average over the last two years. Their plans are to cut them by a further 35% over the next two years.

At the same time they plan to sack 150,000 public sector workers over the next four years. This is when official unemployment has already reached 800,000 - 16% of the labour force. But real levels of unemployment are about one and a half times the official estimates.

The government has made huge expenditure cuts on education, health and social services. In our public hospitals, a third of beds have been cut - 13,000 out of 35,000.

Many universities are forced to close down for certain periods of time because they cannot pay electricity bills, or in order to save on other costs.

Pasok's attacks

What is the government's answer to this desperate crisis? They are now planning to sell off all our public utilities - electricity, water, railways, and the docks.

They want to smash collective bargaining and change the law to make it easier to sack workers.

They are raising taxes - both direct and indirect. VAT has gone up by 4% to 23%.

Pensions have been massively cut. The retirement age has been raised to 67. But, even then, you can only get a full pension if you have completed 40 years of work with paid social insurance.

The attacks of the IMF, EU and European Central Bank (ECB) have no end. After a year of savage attacks they have now concluded that the huge cuts are still not deep enough. They are imposing a second 'memorandum' demanding further attacks on Greek workers.

Why is all this happening? Supposedly, in order to pay for the sovereign debt. This debt was created by the piling up of annual deficits. But who created these deficits? Various EU economic 'experts' claim that the debts were created because 'we lived beyond our means'.

But who has been living beyond their means? The one million Greek workers, nearly 25% of the labour force, who earn just €600 to €700 a month? The pensioners, 65% of whom earn less than €600? The unemployed, who are only paid unemployment benefit of around €400 for 12 months before it stops altogether?

The people who are lazy and corrupt are those in power, the ruling elite together with their friends the



Apostolis Kasimeris addressing delegates at the recent NSSN conference in London photo Senan

big capitalists, not Greek workers and pensioners!

They created the deficits, they created the debts. All governments did this consciously, particularly over the past two decades, by transferring wealth to the rich and to big capital, by using the state budget as a conveyor belt.

But they want us to pay for them. Now we are told that, if the government doesn't get loans from the EU and the IMF - under the harsh terms imposed by the EU and the IMF - they won't have money to pay for wages and pensions. Again, this is lies.

The only reason that they need new loans is to pay back the previous loans. In ten years, only €35 billion went into the economy. The vast majority just went back to the lenders, into the pockets of the bankers who make loans to the Greek state, into the pockets of the Greek, German, French, Swiss, and British bankers.

Workers' struggles

So it is not a surprise that there is massive anger in Greek society. This is reflected in workers' struggles. At the moment, there are strikes taking place on a daily basis. There is a demonstration in the centre of Athens nearly every day - often two or three.

But these struggles have not been able to achieve victories. This is because union leaderships have not been carrying out struggles with the intention of winning them. That is because the overwhelming majority of union leaderships are under the control of the two political parties which alternate in power in government, Pasok and New Democracy.

What is worse is that these unions never coordinate the struggles between them. Every sector fights on its own. But, in the present period, no sector on its own can defeat the government, the EU and the IMF - who all work together. The trade union leaders know this very well.

The position taken by the national union leaderships has been particu-

larly scandalous. Compared to what is happening in the rest of Europe, seven 24-hour general strikes last year and three this year, may seem huge. But, given the traditions of the Greek working class and, above all, compared to the scale of the attacks the Greek working class is facing, this is far from being enough.

Working people understand the treacherous role of the Greek TUC leadership and are boiling with anger. Last year, on the day of a general strike, the TUC leader Panagopoulos tried to make a speech at the workers' rally but was physically attacked by strikers. Since then, he has only been seen in public accompanied by six bodyguards!

It isn't just that the trade union leaders don't respond to the needs of the situation - it is also that they systematically sabotage the development of the struggles.

Take the example of my union, the Bus Workers' Union of Athens and Piraeus, which has about 6,000 members. When the government began its attack against us last December, the leadership of the union, under the control of Pasok and New Democracy, tried to justify why they were not calling for militant strike action. Their excuse was to blame workers, saying that they were not willing to fight.

But, when the brutal cuts were announced, they were forced to call for strike action so as not to be completely exposed.

Strike action took place over a period of about three months. But the leadership was not really determined, there was no plan of action, no escalation, and above all there was absolutely no attempt to coordinate the struggle with other sections of the wider public sector that were also under attack.

Towards the end of February, the majority in the leadership decided that it was time to call off the action. They launched a blatant coup d'état against the union. They refused to call executive committee meetings, they refused to go to the meetings called by other members of the union executive, and they hid, so that

a mass meeting of the bus workers would not be called.

They then went ahead with a fake 'referendum' planned to formalise the decision to stop the strikes. Not only was it against the union's constitution, it was also against the law, since they forged the signatures of other members of the executive committee, in order to achieve the necessary majority required to call a referendum. All this was done in order to disappoint, to demoralise, to break the will of the bus workers to fight. For these 'leaders' there is only one word: traitors.

Boiling point

Despite defeats like ours, the Greek working class will continue to fight. It has no other choice because the attacks that we face will continue and they will be immense.

The last development in the struggles of Greek society has been the movement of the 'enraged'. They have followed the example of the Spanish 'Indignados' and inspired by the revolutions in the Arab world. Recently, 500,000 assembled in the central square in Athens. This was perhaps the biggest gathering of people since 1981.

Greek society is at boiling point. But in order for this anger to find a way forward and for our struggles to win, we have to do everything we can to rebuild our trade union movement.

Trade union organisations must pass into the hands of the rank and file. To be democratically controlled by the membership, the struggles must be in the hands of the movement itself.

At the same time we need to rebuild the political organisations of the working class, because today's mass left parties have lost the plot.

But there is another task that we must never forget. That is, internationalism. This is not a struggle of the Greeks alone, but also of the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Irish, the British and more, because we are all being attacked at the same time.

All over Europe, big capital is united against us, but the working class is not able to put up a united resistance. This is the fault of the leadership.

Let me finish with a message of solidarity for all those taking action on 30 June. Get out on the picket lines, on the streets and demonstrations, and show Cameron that, united in action, working people will defeat the government attacks.

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

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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