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Hellenic News, Culture & Lifestyle



Anti-austerity strike brings Greece to a standstill

Greek workers walked off the job on Wednesday in a nationwide protest against wage cuts and high taxes, keeping ferries docked in ports, shutting state schools and leaving hospitals working with emergency staff. Greece's two biggest labour unions brought much of the near-bankrupt country to a standstill during a 24-hour strike over the cuts, which they say only deepen the plight of a people struggling to get through the country's worst peacetime downturn.

Representing about 2.5 million workers, the unions have gone on strike repeatedly since Europe's debt crisis erupted in late 2009, testing the government's will to implement necessary reforms in the face of growing public anger.

«The (strike) is our answer to the dead-end policies that have squeezed the life out of workers, impoverished society and plunged the economy into recession and crisis,» said the private sector union GSEE, which is organising the walkout with its public sector sister union ADEDY. «Our struggle will continue for as long as these policies are implemented,» it said.

Prime Minister Antonis Samaras's eight-month-old coalition government has been eager to show it will implement reforms it promised the European Union and International Monetary Fund, which have bailed Athens out twice with over 200 billion euros.

It has taken a tough line on striking workers, invoking emergency laws twice this year to order seamen and subway workers back to their jobs after week-long walkouts that paralysed public transport in Athens and led to food shortages on islands.

But in a sign it is buckling under pressure, it announced on Monday it would not fire almost 1,900 civil servants earmarked for possible dismissal, despite promising foreign lenders it would seek to cut the public payroll.

STRIKES PICKING UP

Strikes have picked up in recent weeks, underscoring Greeks' anger at record high unemployment and poverty levels. A one-day visit by French President Francois Hollande in Athens on Tuesday went largely uncovered as Greek journalists were on strike.

In northern and central Greece, farmers have been protesting at high production costs and fuel prices for nearly a month, occasionally blocking the country's main north-south highway.



Most business and public sector activity came to a halt during Wednesday's strike, with school teachers, train and bus employees and bankers among various groups joining the walkout.

«We are on our knees. The country has been destroyed, the young people have been destroyed,» said Nikos Papageorgiou, 56, a civil servant. «I'm outraged with the Europeans and our politicians as well. They should all go to jail.»

Hospitals ran on emergency staff and ships were docked in ports as seafarers defied government orders to return to work.

Several marches are expected to culminate in demonstrations at around noon outside parliament at Syntagma square in central Athens, where protests have often ended in violent clashes between police and activists in the past.

Analysts said Greece securing bailout funds in December, which averted bankruptcy and ended months of uncertainty over the country's future in the eurozone, created expectations among Greeks that things would improve for them on a personal level as well.

«If these expectations are not satisfied by the summer, then whatever is left of the working class will respond with more protests,» said Costas Panagopoulos, head of Alco pollsters.

Vehicle used by Velvento robbers still at large located in Naoussa

A four-wheeled vehicle allegedly used by robbers fleeing the scene after a double bank heist in Velvento, Kozani, in northern Greece, earlier this month, was located by police in the northern town of Naoussa on Wednesday. Owned by a Kozani doctor, the car was allegedly abandoned by the suspects who remained at large. Meanwhile, another four suspects, aged 20 to 25, linked to the robberies were in police custody. The vehicle was transferred to a police criminal investigation unit for further inspection.

Surgeon arrested on passive bribery charges

A surgeon in northern Greece who was arrested on Tuesday on charges of passive bribery was to appear before a prosecutor on Wednesday to answer to the accusations.

The unnamed 50-year-old is an orthopedic surgeon at a general hospital in northern Greece and is also director of his department.

According to police, the surgeon demanded a payment of 400 euros from a man whose mother he had recently operated on, even though the surgery was conducted at a state hospital. The patient's son informed authorities of the request and appeared at the surgeon's office the following day with the money, which consisted of bills marked by police for identification. The surgeon was taken into custody after accepting the money and is facing charges of passive bribery as he was the recipient of the cash.

Two Financial Crimes Squad officials remanded in custody over bribery claims

Two of the three Financial Crimes Squad (SDOE) officials arrested last week on graft charges following a complaint lodged by a businessman based on the Ionian island of Lefkada were remanded in custody on Wednesday. The two officials were charged with bribery and extortion after 10 hours of interrogation by police who released the head of SDOE's western Greece department, Costas Brinias, saying that no evidence was found incriminating him.

The Lefkada businessman had claimed that he was being blackmailed by three SDOE employees to help him settle his outstanding tax debts. Police visiting the island for an inspection last Friday said they saw the two officials receiving 15,000 euros from the businessman at a local cafe. The regional SDOE director, who the two officials had told interrogators was also involved in the racket, was freed after the businessman told police that he did not recognize him.

