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Greece

Seafarers open new period in workers' struggles

- News from around the world -

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Description:

The Greek seafarers' strike was a hard fought battle against the neoliberal reform of the sea transport system.

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The Greek seafarers' strike from 16-23 February was a hard confrontation with the government with serious political dimensions. The Panhellenic Seamen's Confederation (PNO) decided to launch this strike as a reaction to the draft law that the right-wing government of New Democracy proposed in order to implement a neoliberal reform of the Greek sea transport system.

This draft gives the Greek ship-owners the right to increase the prices of third-class tickets, which up to now have been decided by the government. The staff needed on every ship which travels to Greek islands (that is how many seamen of different specialties are supposed to be on board) will be defined by the flag of the ship (as a consequence by the law of the corresponding country) and not by the Greek authorities.

Thus the Greek ship-owners will be able to reduce the number of the staff on their vessels by changing their flags.



The seafarers' union was fighting for the withdrawal of the draft, the immediate hiring of all the unemployed seamen, the payment of the deficits of their insurance deposit by the State budget and the signing of a collective labour bargaining which includes 9% increases on salaries.

The participation in the strike was massive and, as Greece is a country with a great number of islands, the consequences of the strike could soon be seen. Not only was it impossible to supply the islands with necessities, but agricultural produce could not be shipped between the islands and the mainland.

However the government chose a hard line response to the strike. They refused discussion with the seafarers and launched a media witch hunt against them. They accused them of being "indifferent about the consequences of their actions on society" and that they "condemned the islands to isolation".

The strikers did not retreat under that pressure. So on the fifth day of the strike the Minister of Sea Transport was compelled to meet with the leadership of the union, without however showing any interest in meeting their demands. On the sixth day of the strike he asked the court to declare the strike illegal. The verdict declared the strike absolutely legal leaving the government in a dead end.

After that, the government decided to take more drastic measures. On the seventh day of the strike they proceeded to the "civil mobilisation" of the strikers, a legal move which effectively put the workers under government control and abolished their right to strike.

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This governmental act led to a mass workers' reaction against the neoliberal policy of the government. The rank and file members of the union wanted the strike to continue despite the civil mobilization.

The leadership of the union is under the control of an alliance between the social democrats and some right-wing forces. The stalinist Communist Party (KKE) has a great deal of influence and presence in the union. Initially the leadership did not dare to cancel the strike. They preferred to continue the strike in the two main ports of the country -Piraeus and Patras- where the majority of the ships were.



This decision led to a massive wave of solidarity from other parts of the working class movement, for the first time since the elections which led New Democracy in office. The Labour Centre of Piraeus declared a four-hour solidarity strike on 22nd and 23rd February, as well as the Labour Centres of Athens and Patras, the Union of Builders, the Union of Bank Employees and the Union of Teachers.

On Wednesday 22nd February thousands of workers gathered in the port of Piraeus and participated in the defense of the strike in front of the ships catapaults. In that way the seamen could not be mobilized, as the government wanted, despite the fact that during the strike a few ships disembarked from the islands.

The workers' solidarity, effectively paralysing the civil mobilisation in the two main ports, was a major political defeat for the government. Nevertheless, the Social Democratic Party (PASOK) and the left-wing parties (KKE and the Eurocommunist Synaspismos party) were not willing to be politically associated with this workers' uprising.

The General Confederation of Workers (GSEE), which is also controlled by the social-democrats and right-wing forces, did not take the responsibility either to support the seafarers or to call for a solidarity strike. Even the left trade unionists did not call for such a thing.

The result was the political isolation of the seafarers' struggle. So the leadership of the seafarers' union decided to end the strike on the eighth day, the 23 February, with unanimous decision taken by all parts (KKE included).

In this way an important fight, which could have been the spark for a general working class mobilisation and have an immense political impact, ended without success.

The strikers' militancy, the worker solidarity, the determination to ignore the civil mobilisation could have led to a strike victory and also paved the way for a general challenge to the government's neoliberal policies. That this did not happen is due to the open capitulation of the social democratic PASOK to neoliberalism and the inability and unwillingness of the KKE and Synaspismos to form a coherent and militant pole to the left of the social democrats.

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In spite of this unfortunate end, the seafarers' strike opened a new period in the confrontation between the working class movement with the New Democracy government.

It also showed loud and clear that a workers mobilisation which is determined to go on until the victory can inspire the whole working class movement and can motivate new struggles.

Yet it showed that in order to have a successful result, workers struggles, especially when they come up against the state repression and tough political decisions, need the anger of the rank and file members of the union to be converted to an organized control and leadership of the fight; that is, the trade union bureaucracy has to be pushed aside and deprived of its control of the mobilization. This will be a central task of the radical and anticapitalist left in the struggles to come.