

Surprise “Economic Coup”: Greek Government Shuts Public Broadcast Station

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Global Research, June 13, 2013

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

On Tuesday night at 11:11 p.m. Greek police forces stopped the transmission of the public broadcasting service ERT, cutting the power supply to its antennas. Workers responded by occupying the station’s main building in Athens suburb of Agia and broadcasting a protest program via satellite and internet. Thousands of sympathizers gathered in front of the building.

The police action was ordered by conservative premier Antonis Samaras (ND) to shut down Greece’s three public television and 26 public radio stations, which altogether constitutes the ERT. Just four hours earlier the government spokesman Simos Kedikoglou had announced the plan to close down the state-owned company and dismiss all the 2,656 workers with immediate effect. This decree ended the public broadcast service after 75 years of existence.

In the coming months, the government intends to rebuild a smaller TV and radio channel with some 1,000 workers, that is directly regulated by the state. ERT workers have to apply for jobs in the new company just as any other applicant. “We are abolishing a front of opacity and waste,” Samaras said.

“What happened here was just done by dictators,” ERT journalist Yannis Darras told the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “Or have you ever heard about a democracy, that shuts down all the public stations in a surprise-coup manner?”

Indeed, scenes like this were last seen in Greece under the rule of the colonel dictatorship from 1967 to 1974.

A statement by the human rights organization Reporters Without Borders condemned the decision to close the ERT as an attack on democratic rights. “Greece has fallen almost 50 places in the past three years in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index, a record fall in such a short period for a European Union member state,” a statement said.

The shutdown of ERT—considered a more serious source of information than Greece’s private broadcasters—is the latest example of the brutalization of Greek politics. In the last five months, the Greek government used martial law three times to crush strikes with police. Demonstrations and protests are regularly attacked by riot police, and journalists are blocked from reporting on them.

These reactionary policies are the direct result of the brutal social attacks dictated by the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented by the Greek government. These policies have slashed wage levels and public services, sending

Greek living standards back decades.

Such social destruction is no longer compatible with democratic rights or media freedom. Ruling elites in Greece and throughout Europe are deeply concerned about social unrest—like the recent protests that have erupted against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey. They are responding by attacking the media and moving to suppress any opposition of the working class.

The attack on the ERT can be traced back directly to the EU and IMF. The IMF already demanded massive job cuts at the ERT in 2011. On Wednesday European Commissioner for Economic Issues Olli Rehn said that the commission does not “question the Greek government’s mandate to manage the public sector in Greece”. Rehn added that it hadn’t been the decision of the commission to shut down the ERT. This statement is not credible, however.

The IMF and EU have placed observers in every Greek ministry and are involved in every single decision taken. They just ordered Athens to sack 2,000 public workers by the end of the month in order to receive the next tranche of aid credits. Some 13,500 more are to be dismissed by the end of 2014.

That is part of the plan to destroy 150,000 jobs in the public sector. The closure of the ERT is obviously part of the austerity measures dictated by the EU.

The junior coalition partners of the conservative New Democracy (ND), the social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left (DIMAR) made limited objections to the closure. They made clear that they agree on layoffs, but that they want the ERT to stay open while restructuring is carried out. Both parties repeatedly raised objections to similar measures but never moved to break the coalition with ND.

Should PASOK and DIMAR withdraw their support for ND’s attack on the ERT, ND can count on the fascistic Golden Dawn party. Its deputy, Ilias Panagiotaros, Tweeted: “ERT, that Socialist-Communist shack, is finally closing.”

Workers have made clear their opposition to this attack on democratic and social rights. Workers in Athens refused to leave the building, after ERT CEO Emilios Latsios issued instructions for employees to leave all of the broadcaster’s buildings or face arrest as illegal occupiers. Most of them are still in the building, broadcasting the protest program.

After this message was broadcast on Tuesday night, thousands of protesters gathered within hours around the ERT’s main Athens building to protest this decision. Many of them stayed the whole night and all of Wednesday.

These included celebrities like the singer Eleftheria Arvanitaki, who sang for the protesters. The broadcaster’s orchestra performed for some time in the building, and their music was relayed over loudspeakers outside. A large crowd has gathered also outside the ERT3 building in Thessaloniki.

Anastasia Zigou, an active ERT worker, told British daily *the Guardian*: “Many of us haven’t slept for 48 hours, but we won’t give in. We are sustained by the huge response we’ve had from citizens, not only here but at local radio stations all over the country.”

On Wednesday, Greek newspaper journalists stopped work in solidarity with the ERT workers. Workers at private broadcasters blocked all news programs until noon and reported exclusively on the ERT protests in later news programs. Some journalists declared that they will strike until the ERT reopens.

Amid rising popular opposition to the government's austerity policies, pseudo-left parties like the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the trade union bureaucracies are doing everything to block the development of opposition. The SYRIZA chairman Alexis Tsipras met on Wednesday with Greek President Karolos Papoulias to discuss the ERT crisis. He asked the president to intervene and initiate a debate in parliament in order to stabilize the situation.

Greece's two main trade union federations, GSEE and ADEDY, called for a 24-hour strike for today. Such strikes are well-known in Greece. The unions are closely aligned with PASOK, back the government, and organize strikes so as to avoid disrupting its austerity policies. If they are now organizing a strike, it is in an attempt to keep working class struggles from turning into a direct political challenge to the government and to capitalist rule in Greece, which they defend.

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