

Hospital doctors join Greek strikes

September 17 2013, by H el ene Colliopoulou

Greek doctors on Tuesday joined the latest wave of strikes to hit the debt-stricken country, with thousands of public sector workers protesting against government plans for lay-offs and redeployments.

In Brussels, however, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said during a visit by Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras that the unpopular policy of austerity was showing results in Greece and must be pursued to the end.

Teachers from schools and universities, civil servants and lawyers are also on strike, in protest at reforms that Samaras' centre-left coalition government is undertaking in return for international bailout funds.

Doctors in [public hospitals](#) are protesting at government plans to merge various hospitals in an effort to cut down on public spending, while lawyers oppose changes in their sector that will result in pay reductions.

On Tuesday, some 200 angry workers from the Greek ministry of development gathered in central Athens to protest at cuts.

Union leader Dimitra Chioni told AFP: "We have just received a list with 100 ministry employees who have been placed on the redeployment scheme. We are sure that this will lead to their lay-off."

A disillusioned member of the ministry's staff, Yiannis Manolatos, said: "There are no selection criteria for the redeployment of [public sector](#) workers, this is a myth.

"The government makes its choice based on quantity, to meet the numbers demanded by the troika (EU-IMF creditors)."

Many secondary schools remained shut around the country, with the main secondary school teachers union opposing a reduction of teaching staff and the abolition of so-called secondary subjects that include foreign languages, art and music.

Universities remained shut as well, refusing to provide the government with a list of names of staff that could be placed on the redeployment scheme.

The lawyers are expected to be on strike for two days, the doctors for three, while the teachers are due to continue their action for the rest of the week.

'light at the end of the tunnel'

The latest wave of public sector strikes began on Monday, ahead of Samaras' talks with EU officials in Brussels and the start of a new audit by European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund creditors.

Barroso said that after huge sacrifices there was "light at the end of the tunnel", with twice-bailed out Greece set to return to growth next year.

"This is no time to take our hands off the wheel, full implementation is essential," Barroso added speaking alongside Samaras.

After six years in a deep and damaging recession, Greece is finally turning the corner, with public finances set to show a primary surplus if debt and interest payments are excluded, said Samaras.

"Today there is no more talk about the infamous 'Grexit,'" he added, referring to the possibility the country would leave the eurozone as it failed to meet its bailout targets.

First rescued in 2010 by the troika of the European Union, the European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, Athens soon needed a second, bigger bailout which included a controversial write-down of some 100 billion euros in private creditor debt.

Asked about widespread speculation Athens will need a third rescue, Barroso said "it is no secret we have to look again at Greece's financial needs", estimated by the IMF at another 11 billion euros in 2014 and 2015.

He said he recognised the pain caused by the austerity policy which had to be "front-loaded" in bailed-out countries because they "were very close to insolvency".

Now the emphasis should be on "growth-friendly" structural reforms", he said, arguing that reducing a bloated public sector or ensuring an equitable tax system were justified in the cause of "social fairness".

Neither Samaras nor Barroso directly referred to the strikes in Greece.

All of Greece's other public sector unions will embark on a two-day strike Wednesday and Thursday, called by the main union, ADEDY.

They will also be joined by unions representing workers in the private sector.

Under pressure from its creditors, Greece announced in July that it would place 12,500 [civil servants](#) on a redeployment scheme by the end of September.

Overall, Greece has pledged to axe 4,000 state jobs and redeploy 25,000 public sector workers by the end of the year, in return for its much-needed rescue loans.

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