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Al Jazeera

General strike under way in Greece

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A 48-hour general strike is under way in Greece as the country's parliament debates a new round of austerity reforms that will help the bankruptcy-threatened government secure rescue loans.

The strike, which began on Tuesday, is set to disrupt or halt most public services as Greek parliamentarians debate an austerity package which they must pass for the country to access the latest installment in an international bailout loan.

The strike has been called by unions who say the €28bn (\$40bn) cuts would slap taxes on minimum wage earners and other struggling Greeks, already hurting from previous rounds of cuts.

"These measures are a massacre for workers' rights. It will truly be hell for the working man," said Thanassis Pafilis, a lawmaker with the Greek Communist Party that will lead one of Tuesday's main rallies.

"The strike must bring everything to a standstill."

Al Jazeera's Barnaby Phillips, reporting from the capital, Athens, said there had been disruption at the nearby port of Piraeus, a key route for tourists and Greeks travelling to the country's many islands.

"Tourism has been hit very badly... This, in fact, is the first 48-hour general strike that Greece has experienced since the end of military rule in the mid-1970s," he said.

Main port picketed

The main seamen's union at Piraeus is not officially on strike, but around 200 members of a communist union and a port employees' union picketed the port to prevent ferries from leaving.

More than 5,000 police were on duty in Athens' city centre, as union protest rallies gathered outside the parliament building.

While buses and trams are not running, Athens metro drivers and other employees on the subway system decided not to strike "so as to allow Athenians to join the planned protests in the capital".

Protesters have been joined by doctors, ambulance drivers, journalists and even actors at a state-funded theatre.

Public administration offices and banks are closed, hospitals are operating with reduced staffing and Greek media will down tools for five hours on each of the two days.

Stoppages by air traffic controllers have also disrupted flights within Greece and to international destinations.

The move comes a day after French banks reached an outline agreement to roll over holdings of maturing Greek bonds as part of a wider European plan to avoid sovereign default.

'Patriotic duty'

George Papandreou, the prime minister, begged the Greek parliament late on Monday to do its "patriotic duty" and vote to keep the country "on its feet".

"In theory he has a narrow majority to push this austerity package through," said our correspondent.

"Most people think he will just about scrape through, as he did last week with that confidence vote."

The package and implementation law must be passed by parliament this week so the European Union and the International Monetary Fund release the next installment of Greece's €110bn (\$156bn) bailout loan.

Without it, Greece faces the prospect next month of becoming the first eurozone country to default on its debts - a potentially disastrous event that could drag down European banks and affect other financially troubled European countries.

Papandreou said he hoped the terms of a second bailout would be better than the first, which was agreed last year.

"I call on Europe, for its part, to give Greece the time and the terms it needs to really pay off its debt, without strangling growth, and without strangling its citizens," he said.