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Striking Greek teachers clash with riot police

By Kerin Hope in Athens

Striking Greek teachers yesterday scuffled with riot police outside the education ministry in central Athens, as the Socialist government hardened its position in the latest dispute over efforts to tighten fiscal policy and restrain public sector pay.

Primary schoolteachers had returned to work after deciding to suspend a month-long strike, but secondary teachers said they would extend the walkout for another week. The dispute has grown increasingly bitter, with the government threatening to fine striking teachers and to extend the school year into the summer.

Secondary teachers are demanding a 40 per cent increase in their basic monthly salary to Dr250,000 (\$950) and the hiring of 6,000 more teachers to reduce class sizes and keep schools open in mountain districts and on remote Aegean islands.

The government has offered Dr15,000, equivalent to 8.5 per cent, in three instalments. But the education ministry says it cannot appoint any more teachers before new legislation to

freeze public sector hiring for the three years.

In parliament on Wednesday Mr Costas Simitis, the prime minister, broke with the Socialist tradition of supporting trade union activity and strongly criticised militant leaders of OLME, the secondary teachers' union. He accused it of using talks with ministry officials on improving educational standards "simply as a means to press for extra pay".

The dispute is the latest in a series of confrontations by special interest groups seeking concessions on tax and wage changes introduced in this year's budget. The government needs a sharp reduction in the public deficit to keep alive Greece's chances of qualifying for the single European currency in the medium term.

Earlier this month it faced down a second attempt by farmers to win write-offs of debt owed to the state-owned Agricultural Bank and tax breaks for buying farm equipment by blockading the main north-south highway. Civil servants opposed to a new pay scale, and seamen, who object to having to pay income tax, have staged repeated strikes.