

On-the-spot report

Greek health service faces catastrophic cuts

Our reporters
15 March 2012

Massive cuts to the public health care service were passed by the Greek parliament on March 1.

The reduction of €1 billion euros in health spending was the final domestic legislation required under the “prior action” agreement with the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank to allow Greece access to the second 130 billion euro loan.

Measures include the extension of pharmacy opening hours, cuts in drugs spending by state pension funds and legislation mandating generic drug prescriptions.

The cuts have led to widespread protests from medical workers. The day before the vote, workers at state hospitals held a 24-hour strike. A common sight throughout Athens prior to the vote was a poster outside pharmacies in which Health Minister Andreas Loverdos was portrayed as a gravedigger.

Social improvements won over decades are being destroyed overnight. Commenting on the cuts, the *Athens News* newspaper stated, “The government spends some 25 billion euros a year, roughly 10 percent of its GDP, on health and controlling a bloated public health system, has been a priority.”

The latest cuts will pile on the agony faced by millions of people after attacks already implemented by the previous PASOK government in 2009.

In October last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted research published in *The Lancet*, “Health effects of financial crisis: omens of a Greek tragedy”.

Due to hospital budget cuts of around 40 percent, many people in Greece were already being forced to go without basic medical services. A new phenomenon never before seen in the European Union emerged of non-governmental organisations such as Médecins du

Monde providing standard medical services to the general population.

The head of Medecins du Monde, Nikitis Kanakis, described the situation as a “deepening humanitarian crisis”.

This week a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to health service employees. In the surgery department of the Red Cross Athens hospital in the Ambelokipi area, staff explained that the economic crisis had resulted in shortages of material. Health workers fear that plans are being developed that would result in the privatisation of the hospital, even though but the majority of people are unable to afford private care. An adjoining hospital has already been privatised and its employees now have different pay and contracts to staff at Red Cross Athens.

Maria had worked in the hospital for 22 years and supervises the surgery department. She said, “There have been a lot of cuts in wages. With the extra bonus I receive, my income, with 22 years of experience is now 1,200 euros a month. Due to the cuts this is 500 euros less than I previously earned. Most of the workers here are only getting between 500 and 700 euros a month.”

A lot of nurses employed at the hospital came from technical colleges and did not have a university degree. Maria explained that most of these now did not earn more than 630 euros, between 300 to 400 euros less than they previously earned.

Nurses are working 40 hours or more each week. If nurses work nights, the pay is only around an extra 10 euros for each shift. “One nurse worked eight nights in December and only got 90 euros extra in her salary,” Maria said.

Staff shortages have led to a situation in which just two nurses on night shifts have to look after around 40 patients at the hospital. Maria told us that she expects

further staff cutbacks in the future.

Demmy explained, “When I started as a nurse two years ago I was on 980 euros. Now due to the cuts in wages I am only getting 560 euros and I have a young daughter.”

A growing phenomenon in Greece is that of children having to rely on their parents for support, even though they were also struggling financially to live. Demmy explained that she felt humiliated as she was no longer able to cover her expenses and had to send her daughter to live with her parents. “At one time I was sending money to my parents to help them and now they are sending money to me,” she said.

Demmy has had to cut back on all her normal outgoing expenses, as the rent on her apartment alone costs more than 300 euros per month. “There is not even 40 or 50 euros left for me at the end of the month and I don’t think it is going to get any better. I think it is going to get even worse,” she said.

Despite this situation, Demmy did not want to leave her job because unemployment was so high and she still has state worker status.

Asked if she had a message for readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* Maria said, “I wish that the situation now in Greece does not happen to other workers of Europe.”

The terrible effects of the social calamity being wrought in Greece was evident in the life-threatening conditions of some of those turning up for treatment in the hospital, said Vissaria, who has been a physician at Red Cross Athens for a year. “We have a situation Greece now where people are coming into the emergencies departments at the hospitals when they are almost dead.

“What I mean is that they do not go to a private doctor because of the cost. They only go to the doctor now when they are seriously ill. When they have something they think is mild, they don’t go to a private doctor. In Greece if you go to a private doctor you have to pay 40 euros per visit. So when they come here some people are in a very, very bad condition.

“We have people coming here who have lost their jobs, people who haven’t eaten for a long time, people who are lonely and ill and who cannot get help from anywhere. We have old people who have children, but

the children now don’t have the money to support their parents to get health care facilities.

“We have many problems here. We have fewer medical supplies. Our salaries are a lot lower than before. My pay has been cut by 300 euros a month. We have to cut back on everything. We can only pay our bills and have no money for anything else.”



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