

Further cuts leading to collapse of Greek health system

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Every newly released detail of the fifth Greek austerity package demonstrates that the European Union is prepared to resort to the most brutal measures to secure the profits of speculators. One of the hardest hit targets of the austerity program dictated by the EU and the IMF is the Greek health sector. In the heart of Europe, a large proportion of the population is being deprived of any sort of health care.

On Wednesday, a number of newspapers reported that the Greek government has agreed to a new austerity package with representatives of the IMF and the EU. A final decision will be made on Sunday. According to the reports, the package includes not only further cuts to wages and pensions and mass redundancies, but also more cuts to the health system. Already decided are savings in health care totaling €2 billion. Part of this sum is to be achieved by laying off 10 percent of doctors and other staff in public hospitals.

This decision could lead to the ultimate collapse of the country's hospitals. There are already daily protests by doctors, nurses and patients all over the country directed against the catastrophic conditions in the health sector. In June, the Greek Medical Association brought the seriousness of the situation to the attention of the United Nations.

According to the aid organization "Doctors Without Borders", the funding of public hospitals has plummeted by 40 percent since 2008, while demand for treatment has increased significantly. Serious shortages have developed because health service suppliers cannot be paid on time under such circumstances.

In some cases, vital operations cannot be carried out because suppliers refuse to provide the necessary medicines and/or equipment. The Greek daily *Ta Nea* reported on a clinic in Thessaloniki that is no longer able to perform heart surgery due to a lack of stents. In the hospital of the central Greek city of Larisa, toilet paper

was unavailable for a period of time. Other hospitals have reported a lack of pharmaceutical alcohol for cleaning wounds.

Doctors and pharmacists are also seriously affected. They are owed €230 million by the country's biggest health insurance company, EOPYY. As a result, patients must pay in advance at pharmacies and also for some doctors' services and submit the bills later to their health insurer. Such upfront payments are often impossible for the old, the poor and the chronically ill, meaning they have to do without medicines and treatment.

The association of contracted doctors published figures showing that EOPYY has a €1.5 billion hole in its current budget. This is due to the decline in contributions to the company as a result of the recession and rapidly growing unemployment, as well as the partial insolvency of the Greek government, which has thus far been denied a €31.5 billion credit by the European Union first promised for June. A recent study carried out in the Patras region showed that some 70 percent of Greeks cannot afford to buy the drugs prescribed to them by their doctors.

A growing number of children are contracting infectious diseases such as diphtheria and meningitis because their parents cannot afford the necessary vaccines. New HIV infections also increased by over 50 percent in 2011 alone.

Increasing poverty, which according to a recent study by the EKKE Research Center now affects more than a quarter of those who still have a job, will lead to more serious diseases in the winter. Many households are already without power and will have to spend the winter months without heat because they are unable to pay their bills. It is against this background that the suicide rate in the country has soared by 40 percent in the last three years.

Especially hard hit are those who have been dismissed due to the social attacks. They are entitled to welfare

payments and health insurance for a maximum of one year, after which they are completely on their own. It is estimated that 25 to 30 percent of the population do not have adequate access to medical care. Half of the 1.2 million unemployed in the country have no health insurance.

The *New York Times* reported on Wednesday on a group of doctors attempting to offer health care outside of official channels. In particular, they help cancer patients who cannot afford expensive treatment. The *Times* quoted Dr. Kostas Syrigos, who declared that in the event of cancer being diagnosed among the uninsured, “the system simply ignores them.” He added, “They can’t access chemotherapy, surgery, or even simple drugs.”

The doctors provide for the unemployed in their spare time and depend on donations of medicine from companies and individuals. In light of the disastrous economic situation, however, such donations are declining, while the number of those seeking help grows. “Right now, to be unemployed in Greece means death,” Dr. Syrigos said.

The newspaper reported on the case of Elena, who has no health insurance and was therefore unable to obtain treatment for her breast cancer diagnosed a year ago. When she came to Dr. Syrigos, her cancer had grown to the size of an orange and had broken through the skin. Elena had drained the open wound with paper towels.

“When we saw her we were speechless”, said Dr. Syrigos, “Everyone was crying. Things like that are described in textbooks, but you never see them because until now, anybody who got sick in this country could always get help.”

In a developed country, millions of people are now being denied health care and left to die on the streets. Nothing could more graphically demonstrate the brutal nature of the EU as an instrument of the European financial elite. It confirms that capitalist property relations are incompatible with a socially just and humane society.



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