

Mass jobs losses as Greek state broadcaster ordered to reopen

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Late Monday, a ruling by Greece's highest administrative court, the Council of State, cancelled the June 11 decision of the government to immediately close the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT), with the loss of 2,700 jobs.

The provisional ruling is an attempt on behalf of the Greek ruling class to manage a crisis that has threatened to spiral out of control. It stated the decree last week shutting off ERT's signal overnight was illegal and ordered it to be immediately switched back on. However, the ruling also says the New Democracy-led government was entirely within its rights to close ERT and cut workers' jobs. It only refers to ERT's TV, radio and Internet operations being restored while the service is restructured. The fate of its magazine operation and orchestras remains undecided.

On June 11, following the issuing of a presidential decree earlier that day closing ERT, Greek police cut the power supply to its antennas. All ERT transmitters were closed down around Greece, as was eventually the global ERT World feed. Workers were given just five minutes' notice before being fired.

Broadcasting workers occupied the building and thousands of supporters converged en masse outside ERT's Athens HQ and at ERT's base in the second city, Thessaloniki.

The closure was the government's response to demands by the "troika" of the European Commission, International Monetary Fund, and European Central Bank for 4,000 job losses to be imposed by the end of this month. It took place just one day after the arrival of troika officials in Athens, who still remain, monitoring the progress of previously agreed austerity measures. First and foremost among these is that the government imposes the necessary public sector job cuts this year, as part of 150,000 jobs to go by 2015.

Prime Minister Antonis Samaras' decision to close ERT and sack thousands of workers had the support of the ruling elite throughout Europe. The *New York Times* noted Monday, "Mr. Samaras has won the sympathies, if not the outright backing, of Europe's ruling class, including Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, who telephoned him on Sunday to urge him to stay the course." Britain's *Financial Times* described the closure as a "necessary evil", before asserting, "ERT's inefficiency is a prime example of what has gone wrong with the public sector in Greece."

It bemoaned that previously, "Workers were hard to fire because of excessive protection". The "troika of international lenders expects 4,000 jobs to go by the end of the year. Before this week's decision to close down ERT, the cabinet had offered little detail of where the axe would fall."

Congratulating the government for passing "structural reforms, including a shake-up of the labour market", it concluded, "The troika is right to demand that Mr. Samaras deliver on what he has promised."

The assault met with widespread public opposition, but those who came to the head of the movement attempted to separate out the fate of ERT from the broader austerity measures being forced through by the government and the EU. They complained that the closure of the state broadcasting company was an "embarrassment" for Greece and that its absence would undermine "social cohesion."

In a letter June 11, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) wrote to the Samaras government making clear it was not opposed in principle to cuts at ERT. It wrote, "The existence of public service media and their independence from Government lie at the heart of democratic societies, and therefore any far-reaching changes to the public media system should only be

decided after an open and inclusive democratic debate in Parliament—and not through a simple agreement between two Government Ministers.”

The EBU added, “While we realise the need to make budgetary savings, national broadcasters are more important than ever at times of national difficulty. This is not to say that ERT need be managed less efficiently than a private company. Naturally, all public funds must be spent with the greatest of care.”

The pseudo-left SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), the main parliamentary opposition, was instrumental in efforts to divert opposition to ERT’s closure into safe, patriotic and class-collaborationist channels. Speaking at a rally outside ERT’s headquarters last week, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras said, “We are appealing to all democrats, irrespective of which party they belong to, that the defence of democracy is a duty for all of us. It has nothing to do with petty party calculations.”

The defence of ERT was a matter of preserving “social cohesion”, Tsipras declared.

Tsipras’ entreaties were an appeal to New Democracy’s coalition partners—the social democratic PASOK and Democratic Left (DIMAR)—to help form a “government of national salvation” in the event that the government collapsed.

PASOK and DIMAR had publicly protested the manner in which ERT was closed, while defending plans for its restructuring—arguing that the necessary job losses should have been carried through while ERT remained on air.

The financial markets had reacted anxiously to the possibility that popular hostility to Samaras’ dictatorial decision could bring down the government. As the court delivered its ruling on ERT, talks were taking place between New Democracy, PASOK and DIMAR to avoid such a prospect, with Samaras saying he would accede to ERT being temporarily opened with a much smaller staff, ahead of major restructuring.

New Democracy welcomed the court ruling as a vindication of its policy. A party official commented, “ERT is shut, ERT is finished”. The Finance Ministry stated that the ruling “confirms the abolition of ERT and its board of directors and orders the Minister of Finance and relevant Deputy Minister to broadcast a programme from a public body until a new body is formed.”

ERT will still be closed down and replaced by a new broadcaster, Nerit, this summer, employing just 1,200 workers. Further talks are scheduled between the party leaders today. Moreover, the “saving” of ERT will do nothing to mitigate, let alone reverse the devastating social cuts imposed on Greece. Even more is to come. On Tuesday Finance Minister Yannis Stournaras and Samaras met troika officials to discuss its plans for ERT and the overall cuts agenda. Also discussed was the failure of EOPPY, Greece’s main health care provider, to achieve the targets demanded, and privatisations.



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