

Unemployed Greek workers face desperate situation

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to people outside the unemployment office in the Omonia district of Athens on Thursday.

The Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) office was busy, with a constant flow of people entering and leaving the building during the five and a half hours it is open each day. Many of those using the office are young people.

Chris is 20 years old and finished his postgraduate studies in engineering in Leipzig, Germany. He now lives in the working class district of Neos Kosmos and has been unemployed for two years. He has only been officially registered with the OAED for the last two months.

Chris explained that he was yet to receive a penny in unemployment benefits from the OAED and was relying on his parents to survive. "There are so many people in my situation who have no job prospects after finishing their studies," he said.

Asked what he thought about the upcoming elections and of the prospect of a SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left)-led government under Alexis Tsipras, Chris replied that he didn't trust them. "I don't trust any of [the politicians]," he said, "That's why I'm not going to vote."

Mass unemployment has been a permanent feature of Greek life since the imposition of austerity measures in 2010. The economy contracted by 25 percent as a result of a recession lasting years.

In this small country, nearly 1.25 million are without work, one quarter of Greeks of working age. Among youth, the official unemployment rate has reached nearly 60 percent and in some areas of the country stands at nearly 70 percent. Prior to the imposition of austerity, long-term unemployment in the country stood at 3.7 percent. Of those without a job, it is estimated

that over 70 percent are long-term unemployed.

Lefteris, 24, came to the OAED office with his father Dimitris, a 66-year-old retired bank employee. Lefteris has been unemployed for more than three years and told us he has never worked. He has been officially registered unemployed since November of last year, but said he had still not received any welfare money.

His latest visit at the office was to confirm that he was still unemployed. Explaining that unemployment was hitting his generation hard, Lefteris said, "I have friends who face similar problems like myself."

"We don't know how much he's going to get when the money comes through," his father said. "It may be at least eight to nine months until anything comes through. In the meantime, he relies on me for money. If things carry on this way, I'm worried that unemployment for young people will go over 60 percent and that this situation lasts for a long period of time, like 10 years."

Dimitris said the family were struggling to keep their heads above water due to successive cuts to pensions carried out over the last five years:

"My son is an only child, but my wife is disabled after she broke her leg in the 1999 earthquake. Since 2010 her disability pension has been cut from 1,000 euros to 400 euros a month. My pension has been cut from 1,500 to 1,100 euros. The last pension cut was in 2012."

Speaking about the upcoming election, Lefteris said, "I still haven't decided how I'm going to vote."

Dimitris added, "We won't be voting for the ones who have just been in power."

Despite the outgoing New Democracy/PASOK government claiming that Greece is now in recovery mode, unemployment has only declined slightly. In October 2014, the last month for which official figures

are available, it dropped to 25.8 percent from 26 percent on the previous month and from 27.8 percent a year earlier. Just over half (50.6 percent) of all young people, aged up to 24 years, cannot find work, and around 55 percent of the workforce affected by unemployment are under 35 years of age.

The government and employers have colluded over the past five years to eradicate many full-time jobs. Permanent employment is becoming a thing of the past, with a recent survey finding that in Greece and Portugal, 25 percent of those people working part-time were jobless or inactive within a year.

As appalling as the official figures are, the true picture is more devastating. It is estimated that the real unemployment figure, factoring in the underemployed and those underpaid or working without pay, stands at around 2 million. The official figures also exclude the many thousands of young people who have migrated from Greece in a desperate attempt to find employment. More than 200,000 mainly young people have migrated in the last five years—the largest movement of people from the country since World War Two.

The *Guardian* described this phenomenon as “part of the biggest brain drain in an advanced western economy in modern times.”

Olga is a lawyer who was visiting the unemployment office on business, as she represents a worker who had been sacked. She qualified as a lawyer a year and a half ago and is 33 years old. She said it was becoming very difficult for working class people to get legal representation.

“Our fees have become very expensive as a result of additional government taxes,” Olga said, “which deter citizens from seeking legal advice. That extra money goes to the state, not into lawyers’ pockets”.

She continued, “Another thing that deters people from seeking legal advice is the fact that courts take a long time in reaching a verdict. Essentially, unemployed people don’t have any legal rights as a result. Even if someone wins their case, there will be a delay in receiving their money. Although there are rules, they are enforced very sluggishly.”

Asked about the social crisis in Greece, Olga said, “Because my family is well - off and I don’t have children and I’m careful in how I spend money, the crisis has not affected me that badly. However, families with children have many problems. It would be very

difficult for me to start a family, as this requires a lot of money.

“I’m going to vote for the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) because it’s the only consistent party, which has never robbed the people. I would also like to see how they would handle the economic situation, to see something new.”

Asked her opinion of SYRIZA, she said, “I would personally welcome a coalition between the KKE and SYRIZA, but this doesn’t depend on me.”

She believed that if the debt crisis worsened under the new government, “I don’t think that Greece would get thrown out of the European Union, as we’re part of a chain and this is not in their interests.”

Kostas had studied Political and International Studies at Panteion University in Athens but was currently without full-time work. He was desperately seeking a proper job.

In an agitated state, he came up to speak to the WSWs reporters and said, “Tell your readers, our politicians are crazy. My company closed, and now I work for just three days week. Tell your readers it is all about jobs. We need jobs.”

Kostas continued, “I am not lazy and I want to work, like many others, but the system does not allow it. Instead, all the money goes to [European Central Bank leader Mario] Draghi and the international banks. It is a mafia system we have here in Greece. There has to be a solution, but it will not come from our politicians. They only think about themselves.”



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