

Greece: Syriza government reshuffle prepares new attacks on working class

Katerina Selin
12 November 2016

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who heads the coalition government under the pseudo-left party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), reshuffled his cabinet at the beginning of November. This is in response to the growing political and social crisis in the country and is directed at working more closely with international lenders, in order to enforce the agreed austerity more rigorously. The new cabinet was sworn in on November 5.

Tsipras had “excluded all voices from the government or negotiations that represented an obstacle in relations with the creditors,” Greek newspaper *To Ethnos* commented on the reshuffle. He wanted to create “new political room for manoeuvre” and “demonstrate willingness to reform,” wrote *Spiegel Online*. Tsipras described the step as “a chance for a new beginning”—a typical Tsipras euphemism for a new wave of social attacks.

The losers in the reshuffle include the Shipping Minister Theodoris Dritsas, Minister for Economics and Development Panos Skourletis, Culture Minister Aristidis Baltas and Education Minister Nikos Filis—four veteran Syriza cadre.

Dritsas had served as shipping minister in two terms of the Syriza government, and is responsible for the privatisation of the Port of Piraeus. He is part of the “53+ movement,” the so-called left wing of Syriza, and had several times expressed criticism of the privatisation plans, without fundamentally rejecting them.

Now Dritsas is being replaced by Panagiotis Kouroumbilis, who was a member of the social democratic Pasok until 2011, voting for the first austerity memorandum as a parliamentary deputy at the time. He later switched to Syriza and served in its first cabinet as health minister, and as interior minister in its second cabinet.

He has been replaced at the Interior Ministry by Panos Skourletis, an old comrade of Tsipras, who had previously delayed several privatisations, such as the sale of the water and power plants.

Former minister for education, research and religious affairs, Nikos Filis, had come into conflict with the Orthodox Church because he wanted to replace Greek-

Orthodox teaching with a more general religious instruction in schools. However, Tsipras adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards the Archbishop of Athens, who had expressed sharp criticism of Filis, implicitly demanding his sacking.

Tsipras has integrated a number of younger faces in his cabinet, whom he can rely on in the negotiations with the international creditors. Among his loyal apparatchiks are the Labour Minister Efi Achtsioglou, his new State Secretary Dimitris Liakos and government spokesman Dimitris Tsanakopoulos.

Before her appointment, the 31-year-old lawyer Achtsioglou headed the Political Bureau of the Labour Ministry and was involved in negotiations with the creditors concerning labour law and social security. According to the newspaper *To Vima*, shortly after entering office, she signed off on the “new negotiating guidelines” with the European experts group, which is demanding reform of Greek labour law. Achtsioglou had wanted to pursue several of their demands, including the introduction of short-time working. The European representatives also proposed extending the mass sackings, changing the minimum wage in the private sector and limiting industry-wide labour contracts and negotiations.

Achtsioglou has to introduce 21 ministerial decisions in the next days, including measures affecting pensions. Supplementary pensions are to be cut by a further €439 million in 2017. This year, pension cuts have already amounted to some €230 million.

This policy is meeting growing resistance. In October, the Syriza government had shown it was willing to attack protesting pensioners using tear gas. Last Wednesday, thousands of angry pensioners demonstrated again in Athens, loudly demanding their money back, which the government had “stolen from the pension fund.” The day before, new cuts in supplementary pensions came into effect, hitting over 248,000 pensioners.

The demonstration ended at the Labour Ministry, where several pensioners symbolically burnt the letter they had

received from the Labour Minister about the pension cuts. Similar protests were held in Thessaloniki and the central Greek town of Larissa.

Tsipras' reshuffle has also strengthened ties to big business. His right-hand in economic questions is now State Secretary Liakos, who enjoys the best links with financial and business circles. He has worked for years as an investment manager and leading stock market figure, and enjoys good relations with the European Commission and the Bank of Greece and its manager Janis Stournaras, who at the highpoint of the crisis between 2012 and 2014 was finance minister in the right-wing Samaras government.

Liakos' political career was encouraged in 2012 by then vice premier Ioannis Dragasakis. He worked on the third memorandum and in 2015, under Finance Minister Janis Varoufakis, participated in negotiations with the European institutions. At that time, in contrast to Varoufakis, he supported a wide-ranging deal with the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker.

A close associate of Tsipras is also the 34-year-old government spokesman Tsanakopoulos, who graduated in law at the University of London; between 2012 and 2014 he was legal adviser to Tsipras and in 2015 headed his political bureau.

Two other new appointments send a clear signal to the international creditors:

One is Dimitris Papadimitriou, professor and president of the Levy Economics Institute of Bard College in New York. The well-known economist, who enjoys extensive connections in US business circles and regularly writes for the Greek business newspaper *Kathimerini*, was a surprise appointment as minister for economics and development.

Papadimitriou's state secretary is now Stergios Pitsiorlas, who since 2015 was head of the privatisation body TAIPED, which is organising the selling off of Greek state assets. These include the sale of several regional airports to Germany's Fraport AG. In the 1990s, the lawyer was an EU adviser on economic aid to Greece, and since 2008 has held leading positions in construction companies and other businesses, including in renewable energy, an area in which Greece wants to work more closely with German business in the future.

In April, in an interview with *Spiegel Online*, Pitsiorlas made clear that he was an important man for Tsipras' privatisation plans. *Der Spiegel* pointed to growing resistance in the government to the privatisation fund, which had been characterised by Shipping Minister Dritsas (since deposed) as a "state within a state." Pitsiorlas responded optimistically: "There is conflict in the government, but Prime Minister Tsipras is personally engaged and intransigent ministers ordered to push forward the

privatisations as planned." He dubbed the new super-fund, which will conduct even larger privatisation projects, a successful concept for Greece, praising the German cuts diktat: "The pressure exercised by Germany to establish this fund will have positive consequences."

Finance Minister Efklidis Tsakalotos, Foreign Minister Nikos Kotsias and Vice Premier Dragasakis retained their posts—a signal to the international institutions that the previous course will be maintained.

Defence Minister Panos Kammenos, from the right-wing populist coalition partner the Independent Greeks (Anel), remained in office. The new cabinet has even expanded the position of Anel. In future, the economically significant Tourism Ministry will be headed by Elena Kountoura. The daughter of a well-known general and monarchist, Kountoura came to Anel via an illustrious career as a model and as a politician in New Democracy (ND) for many years.

The cabinet reshuffle marks a further turn to the right by the pseudo-left Syriza government, which has capitulated to the international financial elite on every issue since coming to power in January 2015. Tsipras is closing ranks and pushing through a hard line against inner-party critics. He needs a government he can rely on in the coming period of class battles. After nearly two years of brutal austerity, the pseudo-left Syriza has lost all its support in the working class.

A recent poll by the University of Macedonia showed Syriza plummeting to 15 percent, while ND rose to 30 percent. The fascist Golden Dawn, with 7 percent, remained in third place, losing some ground. But the mood in the population is directed against the entire political establishment. This is reflected in the fact that all party leaders were rated negatively by over 60 percent of those questioned. The fascist Nikolaos Michaloliakos polled worst, with an 86.5 percent negative rating, followed by Anel boss Kammenos (82.5 percent) and Tsipras (75 percent). Panagiotis Lafazanis, who founded the pseudo-left party Popular Unity along with other ex-Syriza members in an effort to capture workers' discontent, received a 72.5 percent negative rating.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact