Syriza mounts savage assault on living standards and democratic rights in Greece

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Thursday marked three years to the day since Syriza, led by Alexis Tsipras, was swept into power on an anti-austerity ticket.

By August 2015, after just eight months in power, Tsipras and his government repudiated its mandate and capitulated to the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by agreeing to a new austerity package. This was only weeks after Greek workers and youth voted decisively against austerity in the referendum called by the Syriza-led government.

Since then, Syriza and its right-nationalist governing partners, the Independent Greeks, have presided over the implementation of successive brutal attacks on the living standards of an already impoverished Greek working class. Pensions and benefits have been slashed and taxes hiked, while every few months additional state-owned companies have been lined up for sale.

The measures contained in the multi-bill passed January 15 by Greece's parliament are among the most savage yet imposed—befitting a right-wing government whose "radical left" credentials are in tatters.

The bill was passed just in time for this week's assessment by the EU and financial institutions of Greece's adherence to the previously agreed austerity programme. Syriza's total compliance with their diktats—with around 100 of a total of 113 austerity measures requiring adoption carried out—ensured the release of a further €6.7 billion tranche to be paid to Greece over the next four months. Or, more properly, to be loaned to Greece so that it can pay the money back to its creditors, the European powers.

Among the measures enacted were historic curtailments on the right to strike. The threshold for a strike vote to be legal will be raised from one-third to at least 50 percent of all paying union members, not simply those who take part in the vote.

The bill drastically cuts the level of child benefits, with almost 70,000 families to suffer massive cuts. Approximately 15,000 families, mainly those with three children, with an income of more than €33,000, will be deprived of their annual child benefit payments entirely. A further 54,550 families with an income of more than €13,500 who have three or more children—a pittance for such a family—will suffer benefit cuts of between 1.66 percent and 32.12 percent.

Another measure is the establishment of an electronic foreclosures portal next month that will enable the banks to easily offload properties of citizens who have mortgage arrears. This is to facilitate a smoother running of the process, given that in recent months foreclosures taking place at the district court have been met with fierce resistance by protesters, who were attacked by riot police. This measure marks an explicit repudiation of one Syriza's key anti-austerity slogans before coming into power—"No house in the hands of the bankers."

From May, electronic foreclosures will also come into force to settle the debts of members of the public to the state, starting at just €500. Citizens will be given just two weeks to settle debts, otherwise their property will be auctioned.

The bill earmarks a further 14 Public Services and Utilities (DEKOs), employing approximately 40,000 workers, for privatisation. Among them are the Postal Service; the Athens Mass Transit System; over half of the Athens and Thessaloniki Water Supply Companies; 34 percent of the Public Power Corporation and 25 percent of Athens airport, Athens Central Market and Fishery Organisations and 25 percent of Thessaloniki Central Market. Thessaloniki International Fair-HELEXPO, the Hellenic Salt Works, Etva Industrial

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Zones, Corinth Canal and Athens Olympic Centre are also being sold off.

Within the context of privatisation, the bill establishes an Energy Exchange, which will enable “the reorganisation of the Greek energy market in accordance with [European] legislation for establishing a unified European electricity market.” This allows for the financialisation of the energy market, which will encourage speculation at the expense of working-class households.

The bill contains attacks on education, with “specific criteria, procedures and timetables” set “for the mergers of primary and secondary schools, with the aim of rationalizing school units.”

These are attacks first pioneered by the previous social democratic PASOK government. Teachers must also increase their hours of work and be on school premises for 30 hours each week.

The bill establishes a committee tasked with overhauling the current legal framework regarding “hazardous and unhealthy” occupations. Under Greek law, workers in these occupations have historically enjoyed certain privileges, such as additional wage top-ups and being able to retire earlier. The committee will redefine the criteria of health-related risks, the level and the different categories of wage packet top-ups, as well as the occupations, workplaces and industry branches eligible by May this year.

The multi-bill imposes further deregulation on pharmacies by stipulating a minimum of 40 hours a week that a pharmacy must stay open—8 a.m. to 9 p.m. in the daytime and 9 p.m. to 8 a.m. at night.

Extended working hours had already been imposed by previous legislation, as well as allowing other stores, such as supermarkets, to provide pharmacy services. Imposing a minimum on the hours a pharmacy must keep open will make it impossible for small neighbourhood pharmacies to keep up with larger pharmacies. Local pharmacies will close, impacting sick and vulnerable patients unable to travel far to obtain their medicines.

Syriza makes explicit overtures to one of the most parasitic layers of the bourgeoisie by introducing a new framework on casino licensing, to come into force at the start of 2020. This includes lowering taxation to between 8 percent and 20 percent from the present range of 22 percent to 35 percent.

The statutory entry charge, in place to discourage gambling, has been scrapped. The aim of the new licenses is to increase the number of casinos from nine to 13—including one on the site of the former Athens airport at Hellenikon undertaken by Lamda Development, owned by shipping magnate Spiros Latsis.

Greece’s austerity programme is due to officially end in August, with Tsipras boasting that “the prescribed exit from the memorandums cannot be stopped by anyone.” In reality, even if the current programme is completed, supervision of the country’s finances and unviable €323 billion sovereign debt—a staggering 180 percent of GDP—by the EU and banks, will continue.

In the Greek daily *Kathimerini*, outgoing Eurogroup Working Group chief Thomas Wieser referred to the “enhanced supervision” regime that Ireland, Portugal, Cyprus and Spain will remain under until their debts are fully paid. In Greece’s case, this is not likely to be until 2060, if ever. According to Wieser, “enhanced supervision” must take into account a worsening economic and financial situation: “If the risks are predominantly in the financial sector or fiscal, you have a more frequent and intensive monitoring by the institutions with a more structured and extensive discussion.”

Extending the regime of supervision is strongly advocated by the Greek ruling elite, with a recent poll revealing that 64 percent of Greek CEOs advocate additional supervision post-August.

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