

# Greek workers strike to oppose New Democracy government's anti-union legislation

John Vassilopoulos  
1 October 2019

Broad sections of Greek workers participated in a 24-hour strike last Tuesday called by public sector union federation ADEDY against a prospective “growth” multi-bill that the conservative New Democracy (ND) government submitted to parliament for debate. It was the first major strike called since ND came to power in July.

Transport was brought to a standstill in Athens as bus, trolley and light railway drivers joined the strike, while passenger ferries also remained docked.

The multi-bill contains amendments to existing legislation including attacks on the right to strike and enabling the fast-tracking of so-called “strategic investments.”

According to reports, all public services were shut down, including public schools, while hospitals operated with skeleton crews. There was participation by some private sector workers, including bank employees, retail, construction and telecommunications workers.

Speaking to *Euronews*, George Stefanakis, a 35-year-old cook said, “This is a terrible law, it is undemocratic, it gives everything to the employers—tax breaks, whatever wages they decide. They will be able to reduce wages whenever they want according to their plans and profits, leaving our livelihood and the workers’ needs aside.”

In an interview with the newspaper *Parapolitika* a few days before the strike, Growth and Investment Minister Adonis Georgiadis underscored the pro-business agenda behind the bill, stating, “It’s not the end of our effort, but [the bill] is the most quick action that we could have made to show to entrepreneurs as well as investors our good intentions to solve chronic

problems. We are here to listen to the requests of the market so that we can solve additional issues in the next bill. Generally, our intention is to turn Greece into the most business-friendly country in Europe.”

At the centre of the bill are amendments that overhaul existing trade union legislation. This includes the establishment of an electronic register of trade unions at the Ministry of Labour which will hold information including how many members participated in union leadership elections, details of financial accounts, as well as a roster of its members. Electronic voting in strike ballots is to be introduced, with the law stipulating that the Labour Ministry reserves the right “to define the terms, conditions and every detail for implementing this provision.”

By setting up the framework of government-controlled trade unions, these measures have grave implications for the democratic rights of Greek workers. It is entirely feasible for the electronic register to evolve into a surveillance mechanism to blacklist and persecute militant workers. At the same time, the aim of introducing electronic strike balloting is to atomise workers by undermining participation in real-time meetings where the consensus to call a strike is reached on a collective basis. The fact that the process is to be defined by the Labour Ministry with no transparent oversight raises serious questions about the prospect of the new system being used to rig vote results.

New amendments also facilitate the fast-tracking of so-called strategic investments by stipulating that any planning rules and restrictions can now be bypassed. To ensure compliance with this, the law states that civil servants refusing to rubber-stamp planning permissions

in time can now be disciplined, and subject to at least a three-month suspension. Speaking of this in an interview to Alpha TV, Georgiadis invoked the language of McCarthyism, stating that “civil servants and especially their majority who are extremely scrupulous should not fear such measures.”

This has especially chilling implications in a country that was ruled by a military junta as recently as 1974, and where during the Cold War era and until as late as 1981, working in the public sector required a “Certificate of Social Beliefs” affirming that the holder was not a communist or a communist sympathiser. These measures are in line with the turn to authoritarianism worldwide as ruling elites conclude that unprecedented levels of inequality are not compatible with democratic norms.

The electronic register of trade unions is a demand made by the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund while the pro-capitalist, pseudo-left Syriza government was still in power. It would likely have been passed into law had Syriza won the elections this summer. The majority of trade union clauses in the multi-bill are in any case amendments on anti-trade union legislation passed by Syriza—such as the demand that strike ballots are only valid if more than half of the membership participate.

Additional clauses also build on the toothless collective bargaining legislation brought in by Syriza, after it was abolished in February 2012 at the behest of EU/IMF diktats as part of Greece’s bailout programme. Reintroduced last year by Syriza, collective agreements are extremely limited given that they are only valid if they cover more than half the workforce in a sector. Companies are also given the freedom to block an agreement from being ratified simply by refusing to submit employee statistics, which is done on a voluntary basis. Any collective agreement is influenced by the downward pressure of the minimum wage, currently a paltry €650 a month, which continues to be set unilaterally by the Ministry of Labour based on “competitiveness” criteria.

The new bill now seeks to skew collective agreements even more in favour of the employers, stating that even where collective agreements exist these can be rendered invalid for companies facing economic problems with the criteria for exempt companies set by the Ministry of Labour.

As for the clauses to fast-track investments, these are a continuation of Syriza’s record on privatisation, which surpassed even that of previous conservative and social democratic administrations—with 2018 seeing a record €3.6 billion of foreign direct investment, the highest in the decade. This drive would have continued had Syriza won the election. Speaking to the *Financial Times* in May, former prime minister Alexis Tsipras said: “Of course I recognise that there are still problems, that we have to [make] more reforms—and reforms are like a bicycle: if you don’t [make] them you fall down.”

The strike against the ND’s legislation was endorsed by the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece, whose trade union federation All Workers’ Militant Front (PAME) participated. In its statement PAME condemned the GSEE private sector trade union federation for refusing to take part in the strike accusing its leadership, made up of PASKE and DAKE, the social democratic and conservative factions in the bureaucracy, of plotting to have the ADEDY strike undermined and ultimately cancelled. GSEE has called a separate 24-hour strike against the multi-bill for October 2.

By posturing as a left-wing critic of the trade union bureaucracy while operating within its framework, PAME’s well-worn tactic ensures that at critical points all struggles remain within the straitjacket of the unions, leading to their defeat. While it rails against the establishment leadership within GSEE, PAME is silent on the fact that the leader of ADEDY, Giorgos Paidas, is a member of New Democracy and stood for the party in the European elections this year. PAME has since issued a statement uncritically endorsing the October 2 GSEE strike, with all criticisms of its “treacherous leadership” now conveniently forgotten.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**