

Greek workers protest draconian employment legislation

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12 May 2021

Workers in Greece are protesting draconian new labour laws imposed by the conservative New Democracy (ND) government.

Two national strikes took place in Greece last week. The first of these, called by the private sector General Confederation of Trade Unions (GSEE), took place on May 4. On May 6, the ADEDY public sector federation called out its members. The May 6 strike was endorsed by the Athens Workers' Centre which represents private sector workers in the capital.

The strikes were called in response to the anti-working-class labour bill submitted to parliament on Wednesday, which will allow employers to increase the working day from a standard eight hours to 10 hours, without paying additional overtime. The government plans to pass the law in June.

On both days there were work stoppages on public transport with intercity and suburban rail services completely suspended May 4, and the Athens Metro, trolley and tram services brought to a standstill two days later.

The statutory eight-hour day has long been a dead letter in Greece. A survey conducted by GSEE at the start of the year found that over half of respondents work more than the standard working hours on a weekly basis. Of those, a quarter stated that they work one to three hours extra while 17 percent work between three to six hours extra. Significantly, 40 percent of those working overtime do not get paid for it.

The government is presenting this measure as favourable to workers since it is nominally a “voluntary” arrangement with workers being able to claim the additional hours as ‘time off in lieu’. Speaking to Skai TV last month, Labour Minister Kostis Hatzidakis said, “We are giving greater flexibility to workers without lowering their income.”

GSEE’s survey revealed that there is little support among Greek workers for the new measure with 73 percent stating that they prefer financial compensation for their overtime instead of time off in lieu.

In his speech marking May Day, ADEDY president Dimitris Bratis warned the government was preparing “to abolish the most emblematic and important gain of the [labour] movement, the eight-hour day.”

This is so much hot air. The unions long ago played a major role in overseeing the extension of the working day. A law passed in 2011 by the social democratic PASOK government, with no opposition from their partners in the ADEDY/GSEE unions, allows for extending the working day up to 10 hours in workplaces where this has been agreed as part of a collective contract. Major corporations where this is enforced include telecommunications company OTE, Alpha Bank, cigarette manufacturer Papastratos, and drinks manufacturer Ivi.

What is animating the union bureaucracy is that the new law undermines their own position, given that the scrapping of the eight-hour day can now be imposed on workers through individual “agreements” in unionised and non-unionised workplaces alike.

Ultimately, the new measure is designed to implement working practices which maximise the extraction of surplus value by intensifying exploitation during peak times. Time off in lieu arrangements—instead of paying higher overtime rates—ensure that even more profit goes to line the pockets of the corporations

Another measure within the bill which facilitates this process is an increase in the limit of legally permitted overtime. Currently set at 96 hours a year in manufacturing and 120 hours in all other industries, the new bill aims to impose a 150-hour limit per year

across all companies.

The bill also undermines the right to strike by stipulating that a “minimum guaranteed service” of 33 percent in all public utility service providers—such as the Athens Metro—must be provided during industrial action.

The new bill is one of many similar measures being undertaken by ruling elites internationally, who are seeking to intensify their exploitation of the working class in order to pay for the raft of corporate bailout measures implemented during the pandemic. Greece’s economy, heavily reliant on the tourist industry and hit especially hard by the pandemic, shrank by 10 percent in 2020. During the same period national debt has ballooned to 205.6 percent of GDP, the highest in the eurozone and over 25 percent higher than it was at the end of 2014—at the height of the Greek debt crisis.

Greece’s ruling elite is set to receive €31 billion euros from the EU’s 750 billion euro post-pandemic stimulus fund over the next six years as part of an investment programme dubbed “Greece 2.0”, which is worth a total of €57 billion. The EU is advancing post-pandemic funds to member states over a seven-year period, conditional on austerity measures akin to those imposed by successive Greek governments over the past decade. These were mandated by the EU and International Monetary Fund following the 2008/09 global financial crisis, with Greece transformed into a test case for brutal austerity throughout the continent.

The Greek ruling class has become so adept at imposing vicious social cuts that its “Greece 2.0” plan was described by an EU official speaking to the *Financial Times* as “one of the best we have seen so far,” adding that “the [financial bailout] programme experience [has] help[ed] a lot.”

The opposition pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) endorsed the May 6 strike, with party leader and former prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, and other senior Syriza officials attending the main march in Athens. Tsipras stated, “this will be a monumental fight to defend the right of workers and the popular majority to life and dignity. And it is a fight that we will give to the end.” These words were uttered by the scoundrel who was swept to power in January 2015 on an anti-austerity ticket only to junk this mandate within weeks.

Following the July 2015 referendum, in which

workers overwhelmingly rejected a third austerity package, Syriza, along with its junior coalition partner the far-right Independent Greeks, agreed to a bailout package with the EU/IMF a few weeks later. The next four years saw Syriza impose austerity that was even more savage than that enforced by the previous social democratic and ND-led administrations. In 2018, Syriza implemented legislation raising the threshold for a strike vote from a third to at least 50 percent of a union’s membership.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) also endorsed the May 6 strike, with trade unions affiliated to its All Workers Militant Front (PAME) taking part in the rally on the day. In an interview, KKE general secretary Dimitris Koutsoumbas stated that “the massive strike demonstration for May Day was the first answer by workers who do not want to become the ‘slaves of the 21st century’”.

In fact, there were many such “answers” by Greek workers in countless general strikes over the previous decade against austerity, all of which were systematically betrayed by the unions. PAME played an instrumental role in this. By posturing as the militant wing of the trade union bureaucracy it ensured, by allowing workers to let off steam while the measures passed regardless, that none of the strikes got out of the bureaucracy’s control.

The lesson of the past decade in Greece is that no confidence can be played in the trade union bureaucracy and their pseudo-left cheerleaders. To take the fight forward workers must set up their own rank-and-file committees—independent of the unions—and in solidarity with their brothers and sisters throughout the continent who are currently facing the same onslaught on their living standards and working conditions.



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