

Greek government unveils savage employment bill attacking workers' rights

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Greece's right-wing New Democracy government (ND) has unveiled a new labour bill attacking workers' rights and conditions. It was submitted on August 25 for public consultation by the Greek Ministry of Labour. The consultation is set to run until September 8, with the bill expected to be put before parliament for a vote taking place two to three weeks after that.

ND was re-elected after routing the pseudo-left opposition party Syriza in June.

The most significant attack is on the right to strike. Under the heading "Protection of the right to work," the clause criminalises picketing and facilitates strike-breaking. It outlaws the prevention of "the free and uninhibited entering or leaving a workplace by workers not participating in a strike who wish to work or who are subjected to physical or psychological violence", as well as "the occupation of workplace areas or entrances during a strike."

The penalty specified is six months in jail and fines of at least 5,000 euros.

The Bill aims to build on attacks enacted in employment legislation passed by ND in its previous term in 2021. That legislation began the assault on the right to strike by stipulating a "minimum guaranteed service" of 33 percent in all public utility service providers—such as the Athens Metro. It also allowed employers to increase the working day from eight to 10 hours.

The bulk of the new Bill involves the incorporation into Greek law of the European Union (EU) Directive 2019/1152 on "transparent and predictable working conditions". Greece is one of a handful of countries in the EU who have yet to implement the directive after a deadline expired in August last year.

The European Commission claims that the directive's aim is to provide "more extensive and modernised rights for all workers in the EU", the opposite is true. It will formally incorporate within the EU exploitative practices

such as "zero hours contracts" where employers are not required to guarantee a set number of hours to workers.

According to the directive's preamble "labour markets have undergone far-reaching changes due to demographic developments and digitalisation leading to the creation of new forms of employment, which have enhanced innovation, job creation and labour market growth."

The directive's aim is ostensibly to "improve working conditions by promoting more transparent and predictable employment while ensuring labour market adaptability." What this means in practice is not placing any limits on these exploitative and arbitrary working practices, but only requires employers to provide in writing all "essential aspects of the employment relationship".

The directive stipulates that where working patterns are unpredictable workers should be informed of "a work assignment within a reasonable notice period established in accordance with national law." In Greece's case this has been set to a mere 24 hours, meaning that workers would need to re-arrange commitments such as child-care at the drop of a hat or risk losing their job.

An employer cannot prohibit "a worker from taking up employment with other employers." This only legitimises the fact that many workers in full-time employment are forced to take more than one job to survive. This is especially true in Greece where the minimum wage is a paltry €780 euros a month, with at least one in six workers employed by more than one employer to make ends meet, according to the Labour Ministry's figures.

In a recent television interview Labour Minister Adonis Georgiadis stated, "Until now it was illegal for someone in full-time employment to also work elsewhere part-time." He added, "Our aim is to make our labour relations more honest. We have not invented something new. We are merely mapping out what is already happening in the world."

This will mean that many of the lowest paid workers in

Greece will now have the blessings of the state to work up to 13 hours a day—the only limit being the statutory 11 hours rest stipulated by Greek law.

The Bill introduces further business friendly measures on top of those outlined in the EU Directive. One is a clause that allows firms which operate on a continuous basis with rotating shifts, such as manufacturers, to extend the working week from five to six days. A long-time demand of the Federation of Industries of Greece (SEV), this will allow firms to increase the workload of existing staff without the need to hire additional staff to cover shifts or pay excessive overtime costs.

The labour bill is one of the first major pieces of legislation to be put forward by the Conservative government headed by Kyriakos Mitsotakis since winning a second term in office in June and marks the viciously pro-business agenda it means to pursue over the next four years.

This was already clear in the summer appointment of Adonis Georgiadis as Labour Minister following the election. Well known for his belligerent fascist and anti-communist diatribes, Georgiadis joined New Democracy in 2012 following his expulsion from the far-right Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) after he voted in favour of the second EU/International Monetary Fund austerity package. Georgiadis served as health minister in 2013 under ND Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, overseeing the gutting of the healthcare system. As Development and Investments Minister in the last ND government, he touted Greece's investment potential as a low wage economy to the international financial elite.

A statement by Syriza's Labour Policy Unit absurdly claimed that the government was "hiding behind the implementation of an EU directive, which is on a completely different wave-length" and pledged "we will fight with workers and the trade unions, inside and outside of parliament so that this monstrosity of a bill does not pass."

This is so much hot air given Syriza's record in government between 2015 and 2019. Syriza was swept into power in January 2015 on an anti-austerity ticket whose mandate was junked 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—swiftly agreed to an austerity package with the EU/IMF. 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 its own anti-strike legislation, raising the threshold for a strike vote from a third to at least 50 percent of a union's membership.

Following its ouster from power in 2019 Syriza continued to haemorrhage support among workers as it moved further to the right, culminating in the rout suffered in the recent election.

No less duplicitous was the statement released by the private-sector General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), accusing the government of "further deregulating the few remaining labour rights using the incorporation of EU Directive 2019/1152 as a pretext."

That workers' rights and standard of living have massively diminished in recent years is entirely the responsibility of the trade union bureaucracy who worked as partners of successive governments to impose their austerity offensive. For over a decade dozens of general strikes were called by GSEE and the public sector ADEDY federation against attacks on living standards and working conditions rammed through parliament at the behest of the EU and the IMF. But the purpose of these strikes was to allow workers to let off steam while the measures were voted through.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) also issued a condemnation of the bill, calling on workers "to be on the alert in order for a militant fightback in order to prevent this monstrosity of a bill from being submitted to parliament." Countless such "calls to arms" were made by the KKE over the previous decade in conjunction with the strikes called by the unions, all of which were systematically betrayed.

The trade unions affiliated with the KKE's All Workers Militant Front (PAME) played an instrumental role in these sell-outs. By posturing as the militant wing of the trade union bureaucracy, PAME ensured that none of the strikes got out of the bureaucracy's control.

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 facing the same onslaught on their living standards and working conditions.



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