Greek government introduces six-day working week in stepped up offensive

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From the start of this month Greece formally introduced a six-day working week, the first country to do so in the European Union (EU). The measure will currently apply in industries that operate on a rotating shift basis, such as manufacturers and retailers, but the measure can be extended to sectors such as tourism in the future.

The conservative New Democracy (ND) government denies that it will apply to the public sector, but it could be extended to areas such as sanitation where rotating shifts apply.

The new measure has been a long-time demand of the Federation of Industries of Greece (SEV). It will allow firms to increase the workload of existing staff without the need to hire additional staff to cover shifts or pay overtime costs.

The six-day week was enshrined into a labour law legislated by the conservative New Democracy government last September. The basis of the law is a 2019 EU directive that aims to incorporate within the EU zone exploitative practices such as "zero hours contracts", with employers not required to guarantee a set number of hours to workers. The new law specifies that an employer cannot prohibit "a worker from taking up employment with other employers," while giving workers the "option" to work up to 13-hours a day—the only limit being the statutory 11 hours rest stipulated by Greek law.

With the minimum wage set at a paltry €830 a month, many Greek workers are already compelled to work longer hours to make ends meet, with one in six forced to work more than one job.

The aim of the new law was to formalise and extend the brutal working conditions that workers already face. Labour Minister at the time, Adonis Georgiadis, commented just before the law was passed, "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."

According to 2023 figures compiled by the EU's statistical agency Eurostat, Greek workers work the longest hours in the EU (39.8 a week compared to the EU average of 36.1.) 11.6 percent already work 49 hours a week or more—the highest proportion across the EU whose average is 7.1 percent.

What little Greek workers do earn is continuously eroded by spiralling prices. According to the April figures published by Eurostat, Greece had the second highest food inflation in the EU at 5.4 percent compared to the EU average of 1.86 percent. Nearly 50 percent of overall food inflation is driven by the increase in the price of olive oil—a staple in Greece—with prices up by 63.7 percent. The 40 percent wage top up for the sixth day of work, with an extra 75 percent if that day is a Sunday or a public holiday, offers scant recompense to Greek workers struggling to make ends meet.

The devastation faced by the working class today is the direct consequence of the successive rounds of austerity during the previous decade imposed by the EU and the International Monetary Fund in return for receiving loans ostensibly to pay off the national debt, which stood at €330.57 billion in 2010. The economy contracted by 25 percent, unprecedented for a European country during peacetime. According to OECD figures real wages declined by a third between 2007 and 2022, with Greek workers today being the poorest in the EU after Bulgaria.

Speaking in parliament before the law was introduced, ND leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis declared "the nucleus of this legislation is worker-friendly, it is deeply growth-oriented and it brings Greece in line with the rest of Europe."

A circular published by the new Labour Minister Niki Kerameus outlined how the six-day week measure is to be implemented. It stipulates that an employer's decision to impose a six-day week supersedes any collective agreements already in place that stipulate a five-day week. The circular stated that the 30 minute preparation time of putting on/taking off uniforms and safety equipment before and after a shift does not form part of the 8 hour day.

The ND government's concerted attacks on the working class have earned it widespread praise from the global financial elite. In its April report the credit agency Standard and Poor's updated its outlook on Greece from "stable" to "positive", writing that "Greek authorities are undertaking a broad ranging structural reform agenda and tackling long-standing bottlenecks."

The report noted that "the positive outlook reflects our expectation that the tight fiscal regime will continue to spur a reduction in the government debt ratio, while growth should continue to outperform that of Greece's eurozone peers." In 2023 Greece's economy grew by 2 percent, in contrast with Germany whose economy contracted by 0.3 percent.

It is no surprise that the introduction of the six day week has been greeted with great approval in the German media as an example to follow. As the most economically powerful country in the EU, the German bourgeoisie led the attacks on the living standards of Greek workers. The German news network RDS declared "We should take lessons from the Greeks", while *Deutsche Welle* asked whether the measure can be a model for other countries.

German financial journal *Handelsblatt* commented that "the country which Germans, led by reports in countless tabloids, dismissed as lazy ten years ago is at the forefront of the debate on the length of the working day. The conservative government in Athens has given employers the ability to establish a six-day week." The article complained that "while economists and employers agree that average working hours have to increase [in Germany], collective contracts and social developments are moving in the opposite direction."

Handelsblatt commented that the introduction of the six-day week has seen a lack of "a storm of protests," attributing this to the fact that "the shortage in skilled workers is plaguing the country too much."

The lack of protests is because all opposition to the austerity agenda of successive governments over the past 15 years has been strangled by the trade union bureaucracy. Since 2010, dozens of general strikes were called by the private sector trade union federation GSEE and its public sector counterpart ADEDY against attacks on living standards and working conditions rammed through parliament at the behest of the EU, and the IMF. According to the GSEE, in the years between May 2010 and the end of 2015, it held 28 general strikes (20 lasting 24 hours and 4 lasting 48 hours). But the purpose of these strikes was to ensure social anger was corralled under its control, and to allow workers to let off steam while anti-worker measures were voted through.

This time GSEE's "protest" against the new measure was confined to an open letter by General Secretary Nikos Fotopoulos to Kerameus, saying the law was from "the most barbaric, anti-worker and reactionary government that has ever ruled the country."

Behind the bluster, in a separate statement, GSEE confined its demands for the measure not to be implemented "until there has been a substantive dialogue between [the Labour Ministry], workers' representatives (GSEE) and those of employers." GSEE's ultimate concern is to secure for itself a stake in deciding how best to ram through the measure.

The main opposition party, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) issued a pro-forma denunciation of the measure, stating that "the return to 19th century working conditions is shameful for the country." Syriza should know.

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 a new austerity package with the EU/IMF.

The next four years saw Syriza impose austerity more savage than that enforced by the previous social democratic and ND-led administrations. In 2018, Syriza implemented its own anti-labour legislation, raising the threshold for a strike vote from a third to at least 50 percent of a union's membership.

Behind the chauvinist attacks by the international corporate media against the "lazy Greeks" during the austerity onslaught of the previous decade, which the *Handelsblatt* article now admits "were never true", was an agenda to roll back the gains won by workers through bitter struggle across Europe in the last century. The successive austerity programmes imposed on Greece served as a test case for a restructure of labour relations across the continent.

This drive has been intensified as the ruling class across Europe aims to end the "peace dividend" by putting the continent's economy on a war footing. Greece, as a key NATO member already spends 3.76 percent of its GDP on its military—a figure that will increase as NATO prepares for a direct confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, and Iran and China.