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Greece

Right-wing attacks on the working class in Greece – back to the 19th century

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“Welcome to the 19th century!” This is how *Efimerida ton Syntakton* (“The Editors' Journal”, a daily aimed at a democratic and left-wing public) commented on the Parliament’s approval of the monstrous bill of the Minister of Labor, Kostis Chatzidakis, presented as a “reform” of labour relations which will allow Greece to seize the “opportunities” for growth, after the 2020 crisis and the pandemic.

The title of the daily was legitimate. The new law abolishes the 8-hour working day and the 5-day week. It removes the obligation for employers to provide additional wages when they request additional work, beyond the 8 hours and 5 days. Instead of extra pay, it promises that employers will give compensatory days off a little later. Probably during times of low demand for the products or services the company provides.

This flexible “working time arrangement” was first introduced into labour law by the Social Democrats, during the period of neoliberal degeneration of their parties and unions. Initially, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was implemented in marginal sectors of the economy (in Thessaly and West Macedonia, sectors in crisis were subjected to this flexibilization, but this was a failure, given the Constitution) and was supposed to remain a marginal and secondary element of industrial relations in Greece. Today, the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis is generalizing this extremely liberal “arrangement”, extending it to the whole of the working class. According to the new law, it is now legal for industrial workers (whose work is hard and arduous) to work 150 more hours per year, without any additional pay!

The worst thing is that this law destroys any possibility for workers to have a collective right of scrutiny on questions of working time and its link with wages. These issues will be resolved in “individual contracts” between each worker and the employer, bypassing the unions completely! This could be the final blow to the effectiveness and legitimacy of collective bargaining agreements, which were already seriously devalued during austerity memoranda, after the 2010-2011 crisis in Greece (a devaluation which, unfortunately, was also a feature of the SYRIZA government, in 2015-2019).

The government knows that the effort to implement this policy in practice will meet with resistance from workers. The new labour law is therefore reinforced by a series of draconian provisions which affect the legal functioning of trade unions and the possibility of declaring a legal strike. Trade unions are now obliged to keep a digital “membership register” which will be available to the Ministry of Labour and employers’ organizations. To be able to declare a strike, the decision must first be approved (by electronic vote) by 50 per cent + 1 of all staff (and not just union members). If a court finds that a particular trade union strike is illegal, the strike cannot be declared again, with another reason or by another trade union organization (a federation or confederation of trade unions). In critical sectors of “public services” (health care, education, transport, energy, etc.), in the event of a strike, 35 per cent of the workforce must continue to work, in order to demonstrate “social responsibility”.

This law is clearly an anti-worker monstrosity. Even the Association of Judges and Lawyers, even the “committee of experts” of Parliament ruled that the law violated articles of the 1974 Constitution (which define strike action as a legal right and institutionalize trade union freedoms, articulating workers’ rights with democratic political rights). Despite this, the bill was passed by the parliamentary majority of New Democracy (158 deputies).

This orientation is based on a reality that was shaped in Greece during the disastrous period of the memoranda. Contrary to propaganda (on the land of the sun, joy and carefree laziness ...), the working class in Greece is forced to work more than in any other EU member state, and more than in many other countries in the world. According to OECD data (for 2019), the average effective working time in Greece is 1,950 hours per year, which is lower than that of Korea and Mexico and much higher than that of Germany, for example (1,386 hours per year). And the price of this hard work is constituted by the salaries which were reduced by 30 per cent between 2008 and 2019: the real average salary fell from around 1,300 euros (in 2008) to 950 euros (in 2019). This race to the bottom is the result of the reduction of the legal minimum wage and, above all, of the constant pressure to lower all wages towards the legal minimum.

Greek capitalists know that during the crisis they also suffered some losses, falling back in the rankings of global competition and still facing the dangerous “trap” of debt. But they also know that in order to “seize the opportunity” of a potential period of post-pandemic growth, they must increase the rate of exploitation of the working class and demand more work for the same or less pay.

This is what the Mitsotakis government is trying to do, “without sedatives”. Kostis Chatzidakis’s labour law will not be the only brutal counter-reform. Plans are being drawn up for the privatization of the public pension and social security system, as well as massive privatizations of all that remains of public goods

This political orientation is not a walk in the park. Six well-known right-wing politicians (former ministers, parliamentarians or spokespersons for New Democracy), who identify with the “tradition” of the party’s founder, Konstantinos Karamanlis, in 1974, have chosen to publicly declare their disagreement with “this estrangement from the principles of social liberalism, which defined New Democracy governments”, at least during the years following the fall of the military junta.

What they are actually saying is that they doubt that Mitsotakis can enforce this orientation while maintaining relative stability and lasting viability. But it would be unwise to expect a serious backlash from the ranks of the right. In parliament, New Democracy MPs were aligned in a single rank and voted as a bloc in favor of the labour law.

Mitsotakis’s government is not an easy opponent. The support he received from the ruling class for the new labour law, as the prevailing media coverage shows, was universal. Two “advisers” of Alexis Tsipras, Antonis Liakos and Myrsini Zorba (both former social democrats and newcomers to SYRIZA), put it this way in a recent article:

The Mitsotakis government is not a government that stumbles. We will not confuse our wishes with reality. After a decade of crisis, the Greek bourgeois forces are regrouping, and this is expressed in the current government and its great openness (to other actors). We must not understand this opening as a simple addition of political currents ... but as a leading bloc with social alliances, means of communication and above all a strategy ... Radicalism is not only the privilege of the left. Right-wing radicalism is proving to be strong and decisive today, going so far as to violate the rule of law.” Their diagnosis is correct.

What is amusing is that in the face of this phenomenon, the tactic they propose is an even greater adaptation to it, by getting rid of all the “burdens” of past left radicalism, by adopting a strategy of national unity, and even by “emancipating the left from the concept of” party “which keeps it locked in the past.

But what is tragic is that these views are in fact predominant within the leadership of SYRIZA. Outside parliament, SYRIZA has maintained an oppositional rhetoric of outright rejection of the new labour law. But inside parliament, Alexis Tsipras's party voted in favour of a series of articles (55!) of the law, opting for a tactic that "distinguishes the good and bad parts" of the law, instead of the necessary complete political and rejection of this extremely reactionary law (as the Communist Party did for example). In my opinion, it was a clear message from Alexis Tsipras to the ruling class that, despite the wishes of its base, SYRIZA will remain a "responsible" party which will not "burn the bridges" of relations, even in the face of extreme challenges.

In the streets, the reaction was strong. The labour bill became an opportunity to try to organize a general strike in Greece after a long time. We all knew it would not be simple and easy. The pandemic context that has not disappeared, the union bureaucracy which declared the strike but did everything to undermine it ..., actual negative changes that affect workers, in everyday life and in the workplace, all of these are limiting factors. But the result was better than expected. The demonstrations were numerous, and anger was expressed. The "people of the left" made up the bulk of the troops. The Communist Party, the anti-capitalist left and, for the first time in a long time, a sector of SYRIZA. This composition is still a long way from the broad participation of the working class that is necessary to overturn a labour law, but it should not be underestimated. Anyone familiar with the resistance movement in Greece knows that this is usually how long marches begin, which aim at and succeed in greater upheavals.

The new labour law is now a reality. An important part of the organized movement refuses to submit to it and will try to break it in practice. It will not be isolated: despite the hysterical media propaganda, all the polls reveal a social majority (up to 65 per cent in certain sectors...) which considers that the demonstrators "are right". It hopes for the overthrow of this crucial counter-reform. This "showdown" will be decisive for a large part of the social development of Greece. In my opinion, it will also determine the political situation, unlike the parliamentary manoeuvres or the social democratic adjustment adopted by the SYRIZA leadership.

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