

## Greece: Industrial relations profile

### Facts and figures

Area: 131,940 square kilometres

Population: 11 million

Language: Greek

Capital: Athens

Currency: Euro

### Economic background

	Greece	EU27
<b>GDP per capita</b> (in purchasing power standards, index: EU27=100, 2007)	95	100
<b>Real GDP growth (% change on previous year)</b> (annual average 2004–2007)	4.15%	2.63%
<b>Inflation rate</b> (annual average 2004–2007)	3.17%	2.18%
<b>Average monthly labour costs, in €(2005)</b>	€1,782	€2,981
<b>Gross annual earnings, in €(2005)</b>	€20,174	€28,992
<b>Gender pay gap</b> (Difference between average earnings of male and female employees as percentage of earnings of male employees, (2007))	10%	n.a.
<b>Employment rate (15–64 years) (2007)</b>	62.7%	65.4%
<b>Female employment rate (15–64 years) (2007)</b>	49%	58.3%
<b>Unemployment rate (15–64 years) (2007)</b>	8.3%	7.1%
<b>Monthly minimum wage (2007)</b>	€657.89	n.a.

Source: [Eurostat](#)

### Industrial relations, pay and working time

	Greece	EU27 (unweighted)
<b>Trade union density (%)</b> (Union members as percentage of all employees in dependent employment)	28%	n.a.
<b>Employer organisation density (%)</b> (Percentage of employees employed by companies who are members of an employer organisation)	n.a.	n.a.

<b>Collective bargaining coverage (%) *</b> (Percentage of employees covered by collective agreements)	100%	n.a.
<b>Number of working days lost through industrial action per 1,000 employees (annual average 2004–2007)</b>	n.a.	37.47 days (estimate)
<b>Collectively agreed pay increase (%) (annual average 2004–2007)</b>	3.28%	5.53%
<b>Actual pay increase (%) (annual average 2004–2007)</b>	2.54%	2.1%
<b>Collectively agreed weekly working hours (2007)</b>	40 hours	38.6 hours
<b>Actual weekly working hours (2007)</b>	42.6 hours	40 hours

Note: \* Coverage rate of National General Collective Agreement (Εθνική Γενική Συλλογική Σύμβαση Εργασίας, EGSSE).

Sources: [European Industrial Relations Observatory \(EIRO\)](#) and Eurostat

## Background

### Economic context

The nature of the Greek economy largely influences and shapes the industrial relations system. There is a relatively low proportion of salaried work, amounting to 63.6% of the total employed labour force; this is one of the lowest rates of salaried work in Europe and is as much as 20% lower than the average European Union level.

In addition, the financial structure of the labour market is highly fragmented due to the large number of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as the increasing trend towards a greater prevalence of short-term employment contracts and subcontracts. Taking into account atypical forms of work and the extent of the informal economy, which is estimated at 30%–35% of gross domestic product (GDP), the regulation and implementation of the provisions concerning industrial relations are a challenge.

In recent years, GDP has been rising at rates exceeding 3.5% annually; however, this increase is not equally allocated, since the income of the most affluent 20% of Greeks has consistently been about six times higher than that of the less affluent 20% of Greeks.

### Legal context

Labour relations in Greece are regulated by legislation to a large extent. Fundamental institutions, such as labour union freedom, labour union organisation, the **right to strike** and **collective bargaining** are regulated by law, which is established in the Constitution. A peculiarity of the labour law is the established protection of collective autonomy, which – due to its increased local power – enables employer and employee representatives to define and regulate the content of industrial relations independently, through the preparation of **collective agreements**, arbitration awards and labour regulations, thus setting up more favourable protection limits for workers.

### Main industrial relations trends

It was inevitable that modern developments at an international and European level would affect the development of industrial relations in Greece. The marks of such influence are evident in various ways, such as the intensity of privatisations, mergers and acquisitions, a trend to restrict

the public sector of the economy, the exertion of pressures to expand and intensify **flexibility** in the labour market, as well as a form of industrial relations which is increasingly characterised by a decentralised level of collective bargaining compared with the current centralised system.

Flexibility in the Greek labour market in the last three years has been reinforced by measures such as: the adjustment of **working time** and a reduction in the cost of **overtime** (Law 3385/2005) (**GR0509104F**); the expansion of **part-time work** in the public sector (Law 3250/2004); changes in employment status in state-run utilities and enterprises (Law 3429/2005) (**GR0809029I**); and modifications in **social security**.

## **Impact of economic crisis**

The Greek economy is mainly based on the services sector; for instance, tourism contributes 18% a year to the national GDP. As noted, the labour market also features a significant proportion of SMEs, which have more possibilities of adapting quickly in adverse economic conditions. Therefore, the consequences of the present financial crisis have not emerged, until now, to their full extent. For example, the impact on the tourism sector in terms of rates of unemployment and total income will be evident at the end of the summer of 2009. Unemployment is expected to increase to 9.2% in 2009 from 7.4% in 2008.

The main characteristic of the current financial crisis is that it has exacerbated the domestic problems of the Greek economy in relation to public debts and budgetary deficits. Therefore, international institutes such as the **European Commission** and the **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)** expect that the Greek economy will recover slower than many other European economies.

## **Main actors**

### **Trade unions**

#### *Trade union density*

Union density – that is, the rate of worker participation in trade union organisations – has been calculated at about 28%, on the basis of member participation in procedures to elect representatives. More specifically, the level of trade union membership is substantially different between the private and public sectors.

In the private sector, the density does not appear to be higher than 18% or around 472,304 workers, on the basis of 2007 data. By contrast, the number of union members among public sector employees is calculated at 311,000 persons and represents about 60% of employment in the public sector. The latter number does not include unionised employees of the security forces who are not represented by the public sector trade union, nor does it include non-unionised military personnel. In certain areas of the public sector, union density verges on 90% – for example, in banks and enterprises under state control.

The reason for the strong difference between the private and public sectors is obvious. The private sector is dominated by small enterprises: 97% have fewer than 20 employees. This has a negative effect on workers' joining trade unions, which are favoured by bigger concentrations of workers, particularly when there is no possibility of union representation in the small enterprises.

In fact, the downsizing of the public sector and the increase in privatisations have had a significant effect on trade union membership in Greece, which has already become clear from its evolution to date.

## *Main trade union organisations*

The Greek trade unions are represented at the highest level by two confederations:

- the Greek General Confederation of Labour ([Γενική Συνομοσπονδία Εργατών Ελλάδας, GSEE](#)), founded in 1918, which includes all trade unions covering employees under private law labour relations in the private and broader public sector – that is, 70 union federations and 83 labour centres with a total of 472,304 voting members;
- the Confederation of Public Servants ([Ανώτατη Διοίκηση Ενώσεων Δημοσίων Υπαλλήλων, ADEDY](#)), established in 1947, which includes the trade unions of public administration, where public law labour relations apply. ADEDY is a three-level organisation, encompassing 1,260 first-level trade unions organised in 46 federations and representing a total of 311,000 voting members.

The confederations differ according to various ideological, political and trade union tendencies. The organisational structure of the trade union movement has the form of a pyramid, with three levels of representation: primary or first level (company, regional or craft unions), secondary (local labour centres, sectoral federations) and tertiary (national confederations such as GSEE and ADEDY).

## *Trends in trade union development*

The federations that are members either of GSEE or ADEDY are mainly sectoral in character. Based on the above information, it is obvious that the Greek trade union movement is organisationally fragmented, which is an important factor inhibiting the internal operation of trade unions. Despite the two organisational conventions organised by GSEE in 1990 and 2003 to address this issue, the effort has not yielded any results so far. The goal set in the GSEE conventions for establishing 19 sectoral federations has not yet been realised, which means that combating organisational fragmentation through the merger of trade unions does not seem to be a priority in the Greek trade union movement.

## **Employer organisations**

A total of three high-ranking employer organisations play a pivotal role in the national industrial relations system.

Firstly, the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises ([Σύγχρονες Επιχειρήσεις, Σύγχρονη Ελλάδα, SEV](#)) represents industries, services and big companies in general. Members of SEV are legal entities (corporations and other companies) or employer groups, which are considered extraordinary members. Its members are mainly SMEs, according to the [EU definition](#); over 90% of Greece's industrial enterprises are SMEs.

Formerly known as the Association of Greek Industries until it changed its name in 2006, SEV plays an important role in the bargaining pertaining to the [National General Collective Agreement](#) ([Εθνική Γενική Συλλογική Σύμβαση Εργασίας, EGSSE](#)) and some 100 other sectoral and occupational collective agreements. Its chosen strategy since the 1990s was to give priority to dialogue on all levels. SEV represents 5,000 companies with a total of about 500,000 employees.

Secondly, the National Confederation of Greek Traders ([Εθνική Συνομοσπονδία Ελληνικού Εμπορίου, ESEE](#)) represents trading concerns. ESEE incorporates 13 federations organising the country's commercial societies by district and six Commercial Agents' Federations.

Thirdly, the General Confederation of Professional Craftsmen and Small Manufacturers of Greece ([Γενική Συνομοσπονδία Επαγγελματιών Βιοτεχνών Εμπόρων Ελλάδας, GSEBEE](#))

represents the interests of handicraft professionals and small manufacturing companies. Its members are federations encompassing occupational categories such as booksellers, shopkeepers, café owners and hairdressers. GSEBEE incorporates 82 federations, 56 of which are local federations, while 25 are sectoral and one is a pensioners' federation.

### *Trends in employer organisation development*

Representative members of the employer side have understood the need for social consultation and dialogue regarding all of the issues pertaining to industrial relations. To that end, a better organisational structure of their representative bodies has been achieved, as shown by the increase in the number of primary and secondary associations participating in the national employer organisations. So far, membership in employer organisations entails an obligation to take part in collective agreements.

## **Industrial relations**

### **Collective bargaining**

The current system of collective bargaining has been in force without any changes or amendments since 1990. The law differentiates national collective agreements into the following categories.

- The EGSSE sets minimum wages and salaries for workers all over the country and is signed by GSEE on the trade union side and SEV, GSEBEE and ESEE on the employer side.
- Sectoral collective agreements cover employees of many companies of similar or related industries or sectors, and are signed by sectoral federations of employers and employees.
- Company or plant-level trade unions and company management sign company collective agreements, which cover the employees of a single company.
- National occupational and local or regional occupational collective agreements, which cover employees engaged in a specific occupation or profession at national or local level, are signed by employer federations and occupational trade unions.

Collective agreements at sectoral, company and national or local occupational level (SSEs) cannot contain terms less favourable to workers than the terms and conditions of employment set out in the EGSSE. If more than one current SSE regulates an **employment relationship**, the one most favourable to workers applies, according to Article 10 of Law 1876/1990. Furthermore, a collective agreement at industry or company level overrides an occupational collective agreement if both are concurrently in force.

All dependent salaried work is covered by the EGSSE. In addition, it is estimated that the various collective agreements cover 85% of workers.

### *Legal parameters*

In Greek law, the right to collective bargaining has been established as a right of constitutional order, is recognised as a social right and is set out within the framework of Article 23 of the Constitution, which states:

*General **working conditions** shall be determined by law, supplemented by collective labour agreements concluded through free negotiations and, in case of the failure of such, by rules determined by arbitration.*

Thus, the terms laid down in the SSEs are binding for the parties.

The Minister of Employment and Social Protection ([Υπουργείο Απασχόλησης και Κοινωνικής Προστασίας, ΥΠΑΚΡ](#)) may decide to extend a collective agreement and declare it mandatory for all workers in a certain sector of economic activity if the agreement is already binding to employers employing 51% of the sector's or profession's workers. In practical terms, this means that, when an SSE is signed, all of the parties involved are bound by its terms and conditions irrespective of whether they are members of the representative organisations that took part in the bargaining on the SSE.

There are no voluntary mechanisms for expanding and applying the regulations laid down in an SSE.

### ***Bargaining framework***

Normally, in December of the year when the existing EGSSE expires, GSEE invites the employers' side to a bargaining round in order to sign a new EGSSE, usually for a two-year term. Wage-related issues, including remuneration and bonuses, are dominant in the bargaining agenda, and disagreements often arise regarding the rate of increase. To restore purchasing power, trade unions consider that, in determining the amount of wages, parties should take into account the inflation rate, increases in the prices of products and services, as well as the increase in work productivity. On the other hand, in an effort to boost competitiveness, employers consider the inflation rate as the top criterion and the rise in the cost of living as a secondary issue. Individual sectoral agreements normally follow the pay increases set by the EGSSE.

### ***Trend towards decentralisation***

Overall, the Greek collective bargaining system is centralised, both at an intersectoral and sectoral level. However, in recent years there is a trend for decentralised bargaining at a lower level – that is, at company level – as shown by the information provided by the Organisation for Mediation and Arbitration ([Οργανισμός Μεσολάβησης και Διαιτησίας, OMED](#)), which indicates a significant increase in company collective agreements.

### **Other issues in collective agreements**

Arrangements relating to non-wage matters are also generally included in the EGSSE. The last three agreements, concluded for 2004–2005, 2006–2007 and 2008–2009, included arrangements pertaining to individual dimensions of industrial relations. For example, the parties to the 2006–2007 EGSSE decided to proceed with the immediate implementation of the European framework agreement on **telework** ([GR0801029I](#)). The 2004–2005 EGSSE included a provision for setting up a joint expert committee for submitting proposals and promoting measures for dealing with illegal or abusive practices relating to the electronic monitoring of workers by their employers at work. That agreement also included provisions for looking into the terms applicable to the harmonisation of domestic law with EU law regarding the prevention and suppression of moral and sexual **harassment in the workplace**. Finally, the parties to the current EGSSE (2008–2009) decided to proceed with the immediate implementation of the European framework agreement on work-related stress ([GR0805039I](#)).

## *Training and equal opportunities*

A number of different EGSSEs have included arrangements about [vocational training](#). The 2006–2007 EGSSE included a provision stating that the signatory parties promised to plan and support joint initiatives for the upgrading of [lifelong learning](#).

Social partners have agreed that they will promote [equal treatment](#) and [equal opportunities](#) between men and women at work, and take measures for ensuring decent treatment and behaviour at work regarding gender-related issues.

Notwithstanding the above, it should be noted that arrangements relating to non-wage matters both in the national and individual SSEs are only promises and guidelines. With few exceptions, such as the agreements on telework and work-related stress, such arrangements do not bring about any immediate results for workers, as no special measures are taken or announced for their implementation.

## **Industrial conflict**

Information on the numbers of strikes, strike days, workers on strike and working days lost is only indicative, as YPAKP, which is responsible for collecting such information, has not kept full records, since its regional agencies have not always sent information to the central agency of the ministry. In 2007, five strikes took place resulting in five strike days, 114,847 workers on strike and 918,776 working hours lost. However, in 2008 there was a significant increase in these figures, in a year when a new EGSSE was signed, which would normally result in a minimum consensus, at least as far as wages are concerned. More specifically, in 2008, 28 strikes took place, resulting in 43 strike days, 954,813 workers on strike and 6,922,800 working hours lost. The sectoral groups that took the lead in striking were mainly workers employed by state-run enterprises. However, all sectors of the economy took part in the social security-related strikes.

## *Mediation*

The principal mechanism used for settling labour disputes is OMED, which is primarily responsible for helping negotiating parties when negotiations come to a halt. However, strikes in Greece are mainly against government policy and the target of the relevant claims is the government, not employers in particular. In practice, this means that strikes do not end by filing an appeal with OMED, since the relevant claims are related to broader labour issues. At company or sectoral level, when it comes to individual labour issues that are within the scope of operation of OMED, strikes are fewer, which is mainly due to the low trade union density in the private sector.

## **Tripartite concertation**

The highest social dialogue body is the Economic and Social Council ([Οικονομική και Κοινωνική Επιτροπή, ΟΚΕ](#)), which was set up in accordance with Law 2232/1994 and is similar to the corresponding EU entity – the [European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#). OKE comprises three segments representing employers, workers and a group that includes independent professionals, self-employed persons and local government organisation representatives. OKE advises the government in relation to taking measures on specific issues. The advisory role of OKE, through the submission of documented opinions, is a mandatory process to be followed prior to passing formal laws on matters concerning wider socioeconomic policy, and its advice is also requested by the government when considered necessary in connection with any current issues. Furthermore, OKE can take the initiative to provide advice on topics that it considers important.

The opinions submitted by OKE (about 200 by the end of 2007) consist of unanimous opinions and those including at least two different viewpoints. It should be noted, however, that the government often fails to adopt the unanimous opinions of OKE, which contributes to devaluing such tripartite bodies.

## **Workplace representation**

In accordance with the Greek labour representation system within enterprises, three main forms of representation exist at workplace level: trade unions, works councils and safety and health committees.

Company trade unions in Greece are limited in number, since Law 1264/1982 requires the existence of 21 members for setting up a trade union, and private enterprises employing over 20 workers represent no more than 3% of the total number of companies. The lack of trade union representation in companies is not offset by using alternative forms of union representation within those enterprises, since the law has not provided for the existence of a trade union representative – namely, a company employee acting as a union member or a sectoral organisation – to provide union coverage for the workplace in question.

Works councils can be set up in enterprises employing over 50 workers and, in the event that there is no company trade union, in those employing more than 20 workers.

Safety and health committees can be set up in companies employing over 50 workers; however, such companies represent only 2% of the total number of enterprises. Both works councils and safety and health committees are participation institutions that are functioning inadequately, since they have been established in only 30% of the eligible companies. Thus, worker representation in the workplace is inadequate overall.

Participation institutions in Greece are the result of legislative initiatives. Works councils are set up in accordance with Law 1767/1988, while safety and health committees are established in accordance with Law 1568/1985.

## **Employee rights**

There are two ways to ensure employee rights: judicial authorities and the Labour Inspectorate.

A total of three levels of jurisdiction are responsible for adjudicating cases subject to the labour disputes resolution procedure.

- The magistrate's court of first instance has a single judge.
- The Court of Appeals is competent to adjudicate disputes.
- The Supreme Court (*Areopagus*) is the highest level.

The law stipulates that individual labour disputes are examined by the civil courts according to a special labour disputes procedure (Articles 663–676 of the Code of the Civil Procedure). The administrative courts are competent to adjudicate in cases involving disputes where the employment relationship is governed by rules of public law. The courts have the power to ban strikes that they find illegal or abusive. Employers are not permitted to lock out workers, or to replace striking workers.

The Labour Inspectorate (*Σώμα Επιθεωρητών Εργασίας*, SEPE) is an agency operating under the control of YPAKP and is set up at national and regional level. SEPE is responsible for: supervising and controlling the implementation of labour law provisions; the investigation, exposure and prosecution of violations of the labour law and illegal employment; investigating



the social security coverage of workers; and providing information and recommendations on the effective implementation of labour law provisions. Labour inspectors working for SEPE may enter all workplaces freely on a 24-hour basis.

## **Pay and working time developments**

### **Minimum wage**

The EGSSE, which has been of a two-year term in recent years, lays down minimum wages at a national level. In the public sector, following discussions between the Ministry of Economy and Finance (*Υπουργείο Οικονομίας και Οικονομικών*) and ADEDY, at the beginning of each year an announcement is made on wage policy and a law is passed stipulating the increase rates applicable to the wages and bonuses for individual categories of public servants.

The minimum wage at the end of 2007 – according to the 2006–2007 EGSSE – was €685; the respective daily wage was €29.39. At the end of 2008, the minimum wages were €710 and €31.32 respectively. During negotiations on a new EGSSE, the social partners submit their proposals on the increase rate for wages. The two main parameters taken into account in determining the increase rate are the estimated inflation rate and the growth in GDP.

The minimum wage does not differ for varying categories of workers. However, a worker's level of education, years of employment and family status are criteria used for the determination of their total wages.

### **Pay developments**

In recent years (1996–2007), the increase rates in actual wages were at the same level as those in work productivity, that is, 2.4%. Average monthly wages in 2007 amounted to €1,668 for those working on a full-time basis, compared with an average of €2,366 for the 15 EU Member States before enlargement of the EU in 2004 (EU15). Among the EU15, Greece has maintained the second last position in this regard for a number of years, ranking above Portugal only.

### *Labour costs*

As the increment in actual wage rates in Greece was fully offset by the increase rates in work productivity, labour costs remained unchanged, in relation to productivity, at 2000 levels. More specifically, the rise in average actual wages in the private sector in 1997–2007 was slower than the increase in average work productivity. In 1997–2007, average actual wages rose by 27%, whereas work productivity increased by 36.5%, which meant that companies benefited on the labour cost per product unit, in real terms.

As a result, the unit labour cost in Greece has been the lowest in the EU15; the gap between the Greek cost and the EU15 average is about 22 percentage points (EU15=100, Greece=78). This development is related to the large increase rates in work productivity, which ranged between 1.7% and 2.7% in the 2005–2008 four-year period. The unit labour cost in 2007 – that is, including average gross wages and employers' social security contributions – amounted to €2,062, compared with an EU15 average of €2,192.

The actual wage increase rates amounted to 2.2% in 2005, 3.13% in 2006, 2.41% in 2007 and was estimated at 1.9% in 2008.

## *Gender pay gap*

According to information provided by Eurostat (2008), the gender pay gap in Greece amounts to 10%. However, this marks an improvement on the pay gap of 25% found in 2000. The reduction in the difference between working women's and men's wages is due to the promotion of programmes encouraging women into the labour market and fostering women's entrepreneurship.

## **Working time**

The statutory working time is 40 hours a week. Working time is not one of the priority issues in social partners' negotiations. Nevertheless, one of the main objectives of trade unions is the reduction of working time; however, employers do not agree on that, as they consider that it is important to adjust and ensure better flexibility regarding working time. They would like to calculate average working hours over longer time periods than a day or week.

The actual working time per week is estimated at 42.6 hours. The increase in actual working time compared with the early 2000s is due to the low level of workers' wages, who then try to work longer hours in an effort to meet their needs. It is also due to the policy followed by employers, who seem to prefer overtime work to hiring new workers, because of the higher cost of wages. According to the OECD (2006), examining data up until 2004, Greece has one of the highest levels of real working hours worldwide. In addition, according to data from the Workforce Survey of the National Statistical Service of Greece ([Εθνική Στατιστική Υπηρεσία της Ελλάδος, ESYE](#)) for 2005, the proportion of employees who usually work over 48 hours a week is 20%, which is a remarkably high proportion in a global comparison.

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