Our program for Cyprus (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Our program for Cyprus

The IWW is dedicated not only to the struggle to abolish the capitalist system of exploitation, but also to the struggle for the improvement of the lives of workers in the here-and-now. There are many general issues that plague the working population on the island, in addition to issues that refer to specific occupations, different employment statuses (e.g. the unemployed, students, retired workers etc), immigration status and social roles. However, as we are taking our first steps as an organization in Cyprus, we have decided to prioritize the following ten demands, tailor-made according to the living and working conditions on the south side of the island. Although our demands as a union are not limited to those ten points, we sincerely believe that they affect, directly or indirectly, the reality of the majority of workers in Cyprus.

1) ***We demand a Universal Minimum Starting Living Wage.*** “Universal” means that it must cover the entire working population of the island. “Minimum” means that it must apply to jobs that do not require neither working experience nor degrees or diplomas of any kind; if a position requires anything more than basic education, it should come with a higher wage. “Starting” means that it must be raised as the worker accumulates working experience or undergoes any form of work training. “Living” means that is must be calculated (by an independent scientific authority) based on the average prices of the commodities needed for the reproduction of the workers in the cities or rural areas where they live, as per a similar practice implemented in the United Kingdom. Those commodities include, but are not limited to, rent, bills, transportation, education and supermarket costs; for what is the wage for if not to provide the basic necessities for the worker?

2) ***We demand a legal maximum of six hours working day and a workweek of four days, without any decreases in pay.*** Any additional work must be considered overwork and be paid according to an overtime rating of 1:2. Studies have proven that workers under this schedule are more productive than those working eight hours on a five or six day workweek, and limiting the working hours can potentially increase employment rates; as such, countries like Sweden are currently examining the possibility to implement the 6-hour working day. It should be remembered that the 8-hour working day was initially considered an impossibility, and it was established as a standard only after decades of bloody struggles by the labor movement. Moreover, the 8-hour day was established almost two hundred years ago, and reflected the working conditions, productivity rates and technologies of that period. The fact that it remains the standard today is completely indefensible, and tragically laughable to say the least.

3) ***We demand that everyone working in Cyprus, and their extended families, be considered legal residents and provided with the appropriate documents.*** If an employer is

found employing undocumented migrants, those migrants must immediately be given working visas, as well as be provided with protection from termination of employment similar to that of pregnant women; their wages must be raised to the average level in the company or industry; finally, the employer must be made to pay a fine, part of which to form the employees' Social Security fund, and the rest to be given to the employees as recompense for the lower wages they were receiving up to that point. Furthermore, for the purposes of the Directive 2003/109/EC (status of non-EU nationals who are long-term residents), the newly-acquired documents of the employee must reflect the date when they found work on the island. Moreover, if and when their employment is terminated for any reason, the migrant worker must be given equal opportunity to find another job, regardless of their country of origin.

4) ***We demand that the struggle against undeclared work must not affect workers in any negative way.*** If an employer is found employing undeclared workers, those workers must be provided with protection from termination of employment similar to that of pregnant women, their wages must be raised to the average level in the company or industry (if they are lower than that average) and the time the employee was doing undeclared work must be recognized for all intents and purposes. Moreover, the employer must be made to pay a fine, part of which to form the employee's Social Security fund, and the rest as an administrative fine. This will effectively combat the issue of undeclared work, by encouraging undeclared workers to report their employers without fear of negative repercussions and hostile retaliation.

5) ***We demand that Cyprus complies with the decisions of the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) and abolishes every kind of probationary period of employment.*** The ECSR has repeatedly found that Cyprus' minimum(!) 26-weeks-long probationary employment period, during which an employer can fire an employee with no reason or warning, violates Article 24 of the European Social Charter. Furthermore, we add, this situation makes it extremely hard for newly-hired workers to organize themselves, which is their human right protected not only by international and European Union law, but also by the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus.

6) ***We demand a stronger Labor Inspectorate.*** Accidents at the workplace, and lethal ones at that, are quite common in Cyprus, and entirely disproportionate to the size of the population. The recent proposed changes to the laws regarding the Labor Inspectorate seemed promising at first, but we find the end-result of the proposal grossly inadequate. We demand that a large number of labor inspectors are hired and trained, and then given higher authorities than the ones they have now. Those authorities must include the ability to hand out much higher fines to those employers who break the law, in order to limit the profitability of such illegal actions, as well as the authority to check residences where domestic workers work with the element of surprise, especially considering that many of those workers suffer everything from overexploitation to violence and abuse of all kinds. In the same vein, Cyprus must sign and ratify the International Labor Organization's Domestic Workers Convention (C189) of 2011, to ensure the rights and protection of domestic workers, and thus recognize the significant contribution of these workers to the country's economy.

7) ***We demand that the Cypriot State stops robbing the social security funds of temporary migrant workers.*** Migrants who have been living and working in Cyprus for years have their wages subjected to deductions for Social Security purposes, yet they can not receive any legal benefits from those deductions or a recognition of their years of service when they return to their countries of origin. The Cypriot State must immediately sign Social Insurance Bilateral Agreements with the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Nepal and all other countries of origin which lack such agreements.

8) ***We demand wages for housework.*** The reproductive work that is necessary to maintain a household and raise children should be appropriately compensated. Those unpaid contributions to society, which are primarily done by women otherwise employed or not, have long been undervalued.

For a number of years now, studies in the United Kingdom have determined the overall total cost of housework, and shown that is greater than the combined output of the country's retail and manufacturing companies. We demand that similar studies are contacted in Cyprus, followed by the relevant compensation to the people who lift this great burden. Wages for housework has been a demand of the working class since the 1970s, and in recent years there have been campaigns about the issue in countries like India and Italy.

9) ***We demand wage transparency in both the public and private sector.*** This knowledge is power; the taboo about discussing wages is cultivated by the employers to serve their interests, since it takes this power out of the employees' hands. All workers should be aware of the wages of their co-workers, as it has been proven that this knowledge helps workers negotiate for better wages, but also raises awareness about injustices in the workplace. According to the European Trade Union Confederation, this measure is the most effective against the wage gap between men and women; a fact proven in practice by its implementation in Portugal, France and Denmark. With Cyprus' wage gap being as high as 14%, the need for such measures is of vital importance.

10) ***We demand an end to bogus self-employment.*** Many self-employed workers, including those working for platform-work applications like Wolt and Bolt, are "self-employed" in name only; their working conditions, responsibilities, obligations and earning showcase that they are de facto employees doing piecework. By registering as self-employed, they have to pay a disproportionately large amount of their earnings to build a Social Security fund and have access to the General Health System. In order to make a decent living their only option is to "take advantage" of the fact that their annual earnings are lower than the minimum required to be obligated to file a tax declaration, and thus skip paying taxes and keep all their earnings. This coercion into illegality makes their work even more precarious, and deprives them of access to Social Security, the General Health System and all protections and rights of actual employees. We demand that the provisions against bogus self-employment included in the Cypriot labor law be supplemented by recognizing the companies and persons that provide work for those workers as actual employers, and by providing those workers with all the rights and protections that come with being an employee.

Those demands are not in the least extreme or unrealistic; on the contrary, most of them are based on the standards of other countries, which do not necessarily have a stronger or more advance economy than Cyprus. However, they can not be achieved by electoral politics. The political parties in Cyprus shamelessly serve the interest of the employing class, and many of their voters are indeed the owners of businesses of various sizes; it is no surprise that the employers' organizations on the island have very powerful lobbies, which make sure that the interests of the capitalist class are safe from government intervention. Moreover, those demands can not be achieved by the major trade unions established on the island. Those are bureaucratic organizations, happy to work in cooperation with employers and only comfortable when bargaining for concessions. They lost any ability or willingness to truly fight for the interests of workers, and when striking becomes inevitable, the most they can or are willing to organize are small, limited protest strikes, which do not really harm the bosses. In addition, most of those unions do not bother to organize migrant workers, especially from countries outside the European Union, or fail to do so effectively.

The only way to achieve those demands – the only way that any workers' demands were ever achieved – is through mass industrial organizing and direct action. Workers must build their own organizations and run them themselves, instead of bureaucrats, to serve their own interests, and enroll in those organizations as many of their fellow workers as possible. Furthermore, those organizations and their members must be ready to fight for their rights, because nothing was ever just handed over to workers without a struggle. Strikes and industrial action in general must aim to

hurt the employers' interests, so that they are pressured to back down. Finally, those organizations must work in cooperation with each other, so when one begins a fight, the rest would join in. Such organizations have begun to emerge in Cyprus in recent years, and we fully support them in their efforts.

The Industrial Workers of the World take matters one step further; we stand for the unification of every worker from every industry in the same One Big Union, where an Injury to One is treated as an Injury to All. Join us and help establish the Industrial Workers of the World in Cyprus!

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