



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**Cyprus: Developments in
working life 2023**

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Introduction

This working paper reviews the main working life developments that occurred in Cyprus during 2023, in the light of the elevated inflation and the increasing of prices of essential goods sparking concerns in the labour market.

According to the estimation of the European Commission (2023), the real GDP in Cyprus for the year 2023 is estimated to grow 2.6% marking a decline of 3.2 percent points in comparison with 2022. Domestic demand is estimated as the most important driver of the growth, which has been expanded as a result of continued dynamic growth of employment and wages and to a lesser degree on exports. Other important drivers include the expansion of the turnover of foreign companies established in Cyprus the last couple of years active in the technology sector and the continued rise of the tourism revenues (Central Bank of Cyprus 2023). The Central Bank also expects that the large private investments, currently underway, and the projects for the green and digital growth in the context of the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan will have a significant impact on the GDP growth in the coming years. According to the National Accounts of Statistical Service (2024, 3th quarter 2023), the growth rate is attributed to the sectors: 'Hotels and Restaurants', 'Transport and Storage', 'Construction', 'Information and Technology' and 'Wholesale and Retail Trade, Repair of Motor Vehicles'.

The annual inflation rate in Cyprus is expected to fall to 4.1% following the pick of 8.1% in 2022 as a result of the price drops in energy in compared to the high price levels recorded in 2022, the slowdown in food prices, the full normalization of the supply chain disruptions in 2023 and the expected impact of the single monetary policy in the euro zone according to the macroeconomic forecasts of the Central Bank of Cyprus (September 2023). Additionally, structural inflation (i.e., inflation excluding energy and food) is expected to fall from 5% (2022) to 3.7% in 2023.

The European Commission also assesses that the labour market in Cyprus is improving. Employment increased to 1.8% during the first half of 2023 and is set to remain robust as labour-intensive sectors such as tourism and ICT are projected to grow. The forecast for the unemployment rate is also positive as it is expected to fall to 6.4% in 2023 from 6.8% in 2022. Important labour related issues that prevailed the public discourse during 2023 were: the shortages of skilled and unskilled staff in many sectors of the labour market – i.e., hotel and catering industry, retail, transports, ICT, constructions – and the plea of employers' organisation to the government to speed up the process allowing the employment of third country nationals in all sectors of the economy, the introduction of the national minimum wage and its adjustments toward the end of the year, inflation and the consultation process for the wage indexation.

Political context

The 2023 presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus were preceded by a long and intense election campaign among the three major candidates. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nicos Christodoulides, of Nicos Anastasiades presidency (2013-2023) and a member of the ruling centre-right party DISI (Democratic Rally) resigned from his position and declared his candidacy in May 2022. Before the declaration, Christodoulides refused to participate in any intra-party proceeding of DISI for the nomination of the presidential candidate or to meet with the officials of the party for coordination; as a consequence, he received harsh criticism of disrespect from his colleagues from the party and the parliament. DISI then nominated officially Averof Neophytou, the president of the party, as the candidate for the elections. The election campaign becomes even more complicated as the left opposition party, the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL) nominated Andreas Mauroyiannis, a long-time diplomat and negotiator on the Cyprus problem of Anastasiades government, to run the elections. The three so called parties of the ideological centre, DIKO (Democratic Party), EDEK (Movement of Social Democracy) and DIPA (Democratic Alignment) agreed for a common candidate and formed a coalition to support Nicos Christodoulides; a coalition that is characterised by totally opposing opinions and positions on critical issues Cyprus face today such as the form of the solution of the Cyprus problem, the economy and economic policy and migration. The first round was held on 5 February and as no candidate succeeded to obtain the majority of votes, a second round was held a week later, on 12 February 2023. Averof Neophytou came third with a 26.11% share of the votes and for the first time in the history of elections DISI candidate did not advance to the second round. Christodoulides with 32.04% of the shares and Mauroyiannis with 29.59% advanced to the second round. Finally, Christodoulides won the elections with a 51.97% of the votes and becomes the eighth president of the Republic of Cyprus.

The trade unions of the private and public domain proclaimed and held a general strike in January 2023 following the impasse in talks of social partners and the government of Nicos Anastasiades over the reinstatement of the inflation-linked Cost of Living Allowance (CoLA) for the protection of salaries as prices were rising. Following the crisis in 2013, trade unions and employers agreed, in a transitional agreement, on CoLA payment at 50% in the rise of the consumer price index, renewed up until the end of 2022. The Labour Minister insisted that the dispute should be resolved by the new administration after the elections sparking the decision of the unions for the strike.

Actors and institutions

Social partners

According to the Trade Union Registry Office of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, no new trade union founded during 2023. New employers' organizations were registered in 2023, according to the Registry, however, as follows:

- The district departments of the 'Pancyprian Association of Owners of Motor Vehicles' (ΠΑ.Σ.Ι.Σ.Μ.Ο., registered in May 2022) in Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Famagusta in March 2023 and Paphos in October 2023.
- The 'Pancyprian Union of Car Straighteners and Painters' (ΠΑ.Σ.Ι.Σ.Β.Α.) in June 2023 as well as the district departments of the Union in Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca/Famagusta in March 2023 and Paphos in May 2023.
- The 'Cyprus Sheep and Coat Farmers Association' in February 2023.
- The 'Pancyprian Union of Customs Agents and Freight Forwarders' (Π.Ε.Ε.Δ.) in June 2023.
- The 'Farmers Union of Cypriots' (Α.Ε.Κ.) in July 2023.
- The 'Pancyprian Association of Butchers' in July 2023.
- The 'Fishing Union of Polyvalent Vessels of Cyprus' (Σ.Α.ΠΟ.Σ.ΚΥ.) in November 2023.

The official numbers of the trade union membership are not available yet; it is expected that the numbers for the year 2022 will be available in 2024.

Social dialogue bodies or frameworks

Changes and/or developments in regard to social dialogue bodies or frameworks have not been occurred in Cyprus in 2023. Additionally, no new social dialogue institution at any level – national, sectoral or company level – has been established and no changes in the established regulations in social dialogue institutions and/or conflict resolution frameworks have been observed. Similarly, no changes have been recorded for the representation of employees at company level.

The legislation framework for social dialogue and collective bargaining remains the same as well as the practices guiding the social dialogue.

Other working life related institutions

Developments affecting other working life related institutions such as the Department of Labour Inspection and the Public Employment Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurances have not been recorded in 2023.

Developments in collective bargaining

Changes to the collective bargaining structures and frameworks

We could not identify any changes to the collective bargaining structures and frameworks in Cyprus.

Data on collective bargaining

According to data acquired by interviewing trade union officials, the number of collective agreements that were in force in 2023 are circa 425, half of them in force and the other half under renewal. The vast majority of them are single-employer collective agreements. There are around 72 so called “sectoral” agreements in the private and broader public sector; multi-employer agreements between the trade unions and an employers’ organisation which only cover the members of the employers’ organisation and not necessarily the entire sector. It should be noted that collective agreements are not legally binding, with some exceptions: a. collective agreements in the public sector take the forms of binding laws, decrees and bulletins; b. the collective agreement in the construction sector has been elevated to law in 2020, excluding certain salient provisions, for example wages; c. the collective agreement of 2020 in the hotel sector has been elevated to law as is, meaning that the law will not automatically reflect any future changes of the agreement.

Collective agreements cover the permanent workforce of the entire public sector, non-permanent employees in the public and broad public sectors, as well as, among others, companies and workers in the manufacture, commerce, press, construction, mining, hotel, hospice, forestry, agriculture, transportation, arts and services sectors. However, there are no official data regarding the coverage of collective agreements in Cyprus. The country’s two most representative trade unions confederations, the Cyprus Workers Confederation (SEK) and the Pancyprrian Federation of Labour (PEO), have internal calculations according to which collective bargaining coverage rate is around 40% (Eurofound, 2021). The OECD/AIAS ICTWSS Database revised in September 2023 states that the collective bargaining coverage in 2016 was 43.3% (OECD, 2023).

Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism

On January 1, 2023, the National Minimum Wage decree came into effect. Issued by the Council of Ministers after an arduous process of tripartite collective bargaining, the decree stipulated a gross starting salary of €855 per month for the first six months of employment, and, after six months of continuous employment with the same employer, a gross of €940. There were vocations which were excepted from the decree, including agricultural workers, domestic workers, and shipping personnel; hotel employees were also excepted, as their starting salaries are defined by a law and were higher than the minimum wage. In addition, despite the previous decrees (which provided minimum wages for a number of certain vocations) specifying hourly wages in cases which was deemed necessary to avoid overexploitation, the National Minimum Wage decree did not specify hourly wages (Eurofound, 2023). In the fall of 2023, as provided by the decree, a revision process begun, for the purposes of updating the decree until 2026. A group of academics, as well as representatives of trade unions and employers’ organisations, took part in the Committee for the Adjustment of the Minimum Wage, which was formed to discuss and provide consultation for the collective bargaining process (Aggelodimou, 2023a). Both in the revision group, and during the collective bargaining

process that followed, trade unions called for the increase of the minimum wage to a level which would approximately cover the depreciation, due to the inflation of the last three years, of the real value of wages. Trade unions also demanded the introduction of the Cost-Of-Living Allowance (COLA) in the minimum wage framework, the abolishment of exceptions, and, primarily, the hourly disbursement of the minimum wage. Employers, on the other hand, were willing to accept a much lower raise of the minimum wage, with no further amendments, especially regarding specifying an hourly minimum wage (Aggelodimou, 2023b). The government, which declared the collective bargaining process as mere consultation, finally decided to raise the starting minimum wage for full-time employment from €885 to €900 gross, and, after completing 6 months of full-time and continuous employment with the same employer, from €940 to €1,000 gross (Department of Labour Relations, 2023a). It should be noted that to actually match the depreciation of wages in the last three years, the minimum wage should have been raised to about €1,080 (Cyprus Labour Institute – PEO, 2023). The raise of the starting wages was closer to the demands of the employers' organisations than the trade unions, while for those workers employed for over six months, the raise was closer to the demands of the trade unions than the employers' organisations; however, no further amendments were made (Christou J., 2023). The new decree will come in effect on January 1, 2024.

In addition to the National Minimum Wage, 2023 saw the tentative conclusion of the negotiations regarding the COLA, and, according to the largest trade unions in the private sector, the average wages and other benefits of employees covered by collective agreements were raised by circa 2.5% in 2023 (Kakaris, 2023).

Collective bargaining and inflation

The consideration of inflation in collective bargaining in Cyprus materializes within the framework of the Cost-Of-Living Allowance (COLA), a mechanism to prevent the derogation of the wages due to inflation. Introduced and established by law for the public sector in the 1940s, since the 1960s it was gradually enforced in the private sector as well, by being included as a provision in most (if not all) collective agreements. COLA was suspended in 2011 for the public sector and in 2013 for the private due to the economic crisis, was reintroduced in 2018 based on a temporary agreement in the previous year.

Despite the agreement expiring on 31 December 2021, the tripartite negotiations regarding COLA lasted well into 2023 (for more information see the section 'Collective labour disputes in 2023'). The result of the negotiations was a new temporary agreement, which took effect in June 2023, and will expire in June 2025. The temporary agreement raises the COLA payment rate to 66.7%, while the rest of the provisions of the previous agreement remain the same until a permanent agreement is reached; those include the calculation and disbursement of COLA only once a year, on the 1st of January, and the possible suspension of COLA in the event of economic contraction in both the second and third quarters of the preceding year. It should be noted that the new temporary agreement was reached with the understanding that the negotiations to reach a comprehensive and permanent agreement will not only initiate but will also be completed by June 2025 (Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, 2023).

Developments in governmental responses to inflation

One of the measures that the government took in May 2023 to respond to the increasing of prices due to inflation is the 'Zero VAT rate for essential goods'ⁱ which provides, as the title suggests, zero VAT rate for essential goods such as bread, milk, eggs, baby food, children's and adults' diapers and product of feminine hygiene protection. The duration of the measure upon its introduction was for six months (May 2023 to September 2023) but extended for another six months covering the period September 2023 to May 2024. The initial list of essential good also expanded with the addition of meat products and vegetables, applied from 1 December 2023 to 31 May 2024. The Ministry of Finance and the Tax Department designed and monitor the measure; social partners were not involved in any kind of consultation with the Ministry for the design and/or the implementation of the measure. However, the measure was taken after the pressure that the civil society, political parties, and the trade union movement exercised to the government to take measure to relieve consumers and households from the inflation pressure.

Following the consequences of the on-going increases of fuels and electricity, the government adopted a new scheme, among a package of measures for the green transition, the 'Photovoltaic for all'ⁱⁱ scheme, which provides the opportunity for household who cannot afford to install a photovoltaic system to proceed with the installation without an upfront capital. The scheme provides that the paid off will be done by bi-monthly charges of €150 through the electricity bill. It is estimated that 6,000 consumers/households will benefit by the scheme. Social partners were not involved in the consultation process, as usually; it is, however, one of the most welcomed measures announced by the government.

The new government also ensured the continuation and the enforcement of the 'Tuition fee subsidy for children up to four years of age'ⁱⁱⁱ, first introduced in the academic year 2022-2023 by the Anastasiades' government for the support of families with preschool children to confront inflation and the increasing of prices. The scheme provides a monthly allowance of the 80% of children's tuition fees depending on the number of preschool children in the family, the composition of the family (2 parent families vs single families) and the annual income of the family. The government amended the provision for annual income of the family by increasing the criterion in order to allow a larger number of families to participate in the scheme.

As far as concern the 'electricity support for household consumers'^{iv}, the government extended the decree in February 2023 that provided for the reduction of VAT rate from 19% to 9% for all household consumers and to 5% for the vulnerable groups for the period March-April 2023. The newly elected government, however, did not extent the decree for the period May-August 2023; the social outcry, harsh critics and the pressure by the political parties and society forced the government to bring the measure back in September 2023. Similarly, the government restore the 'Tax cut on fuel'^v measure after the reactions from the society and the ongoing increases on fuels in October 2023. The measure provides the reduction of excise duty on motor fuel by 8.8 cent per litre including VAT. From November 2023 to February 2024, the price of petrol is reduced from €0.429/litre to €0.359/litre and diesel from 0€.40/litre to €0.33/litre.

Inflation in Cyprus is traditionally addressed through the Cost-of-Living Allowance (COLA) system, a wage indexation system, which is aligned with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). It is regulated by law for the employees of the public sector whilst for the employees in the private sector is granted as provided by the collective agreements. The government froze COLA due to the economic crisis that hit the country (2011 for the public sector employees and 2013 for the private sector) but it was restored in 2017 partially after a three-year transitional agreement achieved among the social partners. Under the agreement, the COLA indexation would be incorporated in the basic salaries at 50% of the annual increase of CPI once a year. The agreement was suspended up until the end of 2021 due the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19 and the subsequent disturbances in the labour market and the economy. After a long consultation period with the Minister of Labour and Social Insurances, social partners signed another three-year transitional agreement in May 2023 to apply from 1 June 2023 onwards. The agreement stipulates the increasing of the rate from 50% to 66,7% of the annual increase of CPI. Social partners also committed to engage in a social dialogue leading to a comprehensive and permanent solution of the issue by June 2025, which marks the end of the three-year transitional agreement.

Social benefits in Cyprus are not indexed to inflation. Only to mention that the core social policy of the State, the 'Guaranteed Minimum Income', which was first introduced in 2014 has not so far subjected to any assessment and no pay adjustments have been made, apart from the house rent allowance, despite the on-going increasing of prices of essential goods, fuels and services. In 2023, no changes have been recorded in regards to the legislation that provide the increasing of benefits in line with the inflation.

ⁱ Eurofound (2023), [Zero VAT rate for essential goods](#), case CY-2023-18/3178 (measures in Cyprus), EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2024), [Photovoltaic for all scheme](#), case CY-2024-1/3410 (measures in Cyprus), EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2022), [Tuition fee subsidy for children up to four years of age](#), case CY-2022-36/2823, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

^{iv} Eurofound (2022), [Electricity support package for households and businesses](#), case CY-2022-22/2821, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

^v Eurofound (2022), [Tax cut on fuel](#), case CY-2022-11/2423, EU PolicyWatch, Dublin

Labour disputes and industrial action

Year 2023 was a very turbulent regarding labour disputes in Cyprus. It begun with the first national general work stoppage in the history of the Republic (regarding the Cost-Of-Living Allowance agreement), and ended with a major dispute regarding the pay rates of the low-salaried public employees in December, a dispute which included numerous strikes as well as rifts between trade unions; as for the time in-between, it was anything but peaceful.

Changes to the right to strike

The right to strike is included in the Cypriot Constitution, as well as the laws covering collective bargaining. Moreover, there are very few legal limitations to this right; specifically, the only thing defined by law is the procedure that trade unions must follow in order to organize a legal strike. However, if a case is brought up to the courts, it is up to them to decide whether a strike was legal. The decisions of the Cypriot courts in the past have defined the legal strike as an absence from work with collective character, as a form of pressure against the employer to accept the employees' demands; demands that must only be about employment, financial or trade union issues. There is a noteworthy difference between a "strike" and a "work stoppage". The former must be decided by the members of the trade union through an election process, while the latter can be decided by the boards of the trade unions. On a final note, representativeness is indirectly tied to the right of strike, by the obvious fact that a trade union without members in a company cannot hold elections on whether or not to call a strike in said company specifically (Yannakourou, 2022).

Other than the legal limitations, there are two not legally binding agreements which define the right to strike in Cyprus in many ways. The first and foremost is the Industrial Relations Code, an agreement signed in the late 70s between the major employers' organisations and trade unions in the private sector. The Code includes the categorization of employment issues into three categories: those that are a matter of collective bargaining (wages, working hours, leave etc.), those that the employer has the final say but must first consult with the trade union (disciplinary action, opening hours of the business etc.), and those that the employer has every right to decide by themselves (defining production, costs, control systems etc.). Additionally, the Code includes the categorization of labour disputes into two categories: disputes over rights (for example, the interpretation of collective agreement), which cannot be a cause of a strike or lockout but they must be solved by the government either with intervention or obligatory arbitration; and disputes over interests (for example, violation of a collective agreement), which can be a cause for a strike or lockout, but only after government intervention was unsuccessful. As such, industrial action in Cyprus is directly connected to collective bargaining, and the Code even includes the obligation of trade unions to discipline their members so that strikes do not happen while a collective agreement is in effect, and to suppress any unofficial strike by any means possible (Department of Labour Relations, 1977).

The other salient not legally binding agreement covers the employees in the so-called "essential services". According to the Agreement for the Labour Disputes Resolution Process of 16 March 2004, these workers are subject to certain limitations when it comes to settling labour disputes. These limitations are a different procedure trade unions and employers must follow before a strike or a lockout can be called, a procedure which involves the efforts of an Arbitration Committee. If the arbitration fails and a strike/lockout is called, a "minimum service" level must be negotiated, to

ensure that no irreversible damage is caused to the general population (Department of Labour Relations, 2004). In recent years, and especially in 2023, the major employers' organisations have repeatedly called for the necessity to elevate this agreement into law and to further limit the right to strike in general, going as far as contacting the head of the International Labour Organization about the subject; the employers' organisations are claiming violations of the agreements during most of the many labour disputes plaguing these essential services (Adamou, 2023). Trade unions have denied the accusations, claiming that "work stoppages" are their last resort, and only organised when employers violate collective agreements and procedures (Perdios, 2022).

The only actual change to the right of strike in 2023, however, was brought due to the recent strike wave in the public sector. A bulletin was published by the Department of Public Administration and Personnel, stating that in the event of strikes, work stoppages or events involving work stoppages during normal public service hours which have not obtained approval in advance, the next wage of the employees participating in them will be reduced according to the duration of said event (Department of Public Administration and Personnel, 2023). Although this was not a new decision, and in fact common practice in the private sector, it was not enforced in the public sector often, due to the work stoppages being incidents usually lasting one to two- hours. This, however, was not the case with the recent industrial actions, described in the subsequent section.

Data on industrial action

The Department of Labour Relations has published the following information: a. in 2018, there were 211 labour disputes involving 27,497 workers that were referred to mediation, and 37 work stoppages involving 8,839 workers and resulting in 24,717 lost workdays; b. in 2019, there were 168 labour disputes involving 29,420 workers that were referred to mediation, and 39 work stoppages involving 42,052 workers and resulting in 74,969 lost workdays; c. in 2020, there were 341 labour disputes involving 32,201 workers that were referred to mediation, and 21 work stoppages involving 2,482 workers and resulting in 4,685 lost workdays; d. in 2021, there were 273 labour disputes involving 28,669 workers that were referred to mediation, and 13 work stoppages involving 1,133 workers and resulting in 1106 lost workdays; e. in 2022, there were 264 labour disputes involving 110,583 workers that were referred to mediation, and 13 work stoppages involving 3,260 workers and resulting in 4,970 lost workdays; in 2023, there were 165 labour disputes involving 32,214 workers that were referred to mediation, and 26 work stoppages involving 136,723 workers and resulting in 58,100 lost workdays (Department of Labour Relations, 2023b).

Table 1: Labour Disputes and Work Stoppages 2018 -2023

Year	Labour disputes referred to mediation		Work stoppages		
	Dispute	Workers involved	Work stoppages	Workers involved	Lost workdays
2018	211	27,479	37	8,839	24.717
2019	168	29,420	39	42,052	74.969
2020	341	32,201	21	2,482	4.685

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2021	273	28,669	13	1,133	1.106
2022	264	110,583	20	3,260	4.970
2023	165	32,214	26	136,723	58.100

Source: [Labour Dispute Statistics, Department of Labour Relations, Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, 2023](#)

Collective labour disputes in 2023

As mentioned above, early 2023 saw the tentative conclusion of the negotiations regarding the COLA, negotiations which had reached a dead-end at some point, resulting to the first national general work stoppage in the history of the Republic. The action, which lasted for three hours, was organised by a coalition of the majority of trade unions in the country, both in the private as well as the public sector, with many thousand workers participating (Dialogos, 2023a). Trade unions wanted to achieve an agreement which would restore COLA to 100%, and extend its coverage to every worker, either directly by law, or by laws and policies that would support and enlarge the coverage of collective agreements. Only then, according to the unions, would the institution be restored to its original philosophy, an aim specifically stated in the expired temporary agreement of 2017. The aim of the employers' organisations, on the contrary, was to abolish the institution entirely (Brief Team, 2022).

With unemployment levels quite low, profits on a steady rise and inflation and high prices devaluing the wages of workers, it is not surprising that the year was marked by a very large number of work stoppages, from symbolic one-hour ones to month-long strikes. The disputes which led to industrial action occurred in a plethora of private sector industries. This included, among others, insurance companies (Dialogos, 2023b), newspapers (Union of Cyprus Journalists, 2023 & Cyprus Times, 2023a), cement factories (Cyprus Times, 2023b), ports (Cyprus News Agency, 2023a), airports (AlphaNews, 2023a & Christoforou, 2023 & Cyprus News Agency, 2023b), hotels (Dialogos, 2023c & Cyprus News Agency, 2023c & Cyprus News Agency, 2023d), and banks (Philenews, 2023a). Similar mobilisation levels were observed in the broader public sector as well, with strike action including prison guards (Dialogos, 2023d & Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation, 2023), post office workers (Philenews, 2023b), employees of the social security services (Cyprus News Agency, 2023e), and the still ongoing struggle for collective agreement in the hospitals, resulting in a pancyprian work stoppage of hospital staff in October (Panagi, 2023a).

With many of the above sectors and industries considered to be "essential services" (ports, airports, hospitals, postal services), and taking into account the ongoing labour disputes in transportation, the Electrical Authority of Cyprus and the Cyprus Telecommunication Authority (also considered essential services) has held work stoppages and threats of strike on numerous occasions between 2022 and 2024 (Brief, 2022 & Insider, 2022 & Adamou M., 2024). At the same time, the employers' organisations are pushing hard for the elevation into law of the Agreement for the Labour Disputes Resolution Process. However, their efforts to limit the right to strike are not limited to "essential services". In fact, in addition to work stoppages in the ports (Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation, 2023) and hospitals (Panagi, 2023b), in 2023 employers' organisations have declared work stoppages in banks and hotels as illegitimate and unnecessary (Nomisma, 2023 & AlphaNews, 2023b).

One of the most salient labour disputes of 2023 regarded the pay rates of the low-salaried public employees. In September 2023, the Low Wage Public Employees Initiative made headlines when it demanded that the new government abolishes the chronic injustice suffered by low-paid public employees. Many of these employees are paid €1,100 after 15 years of service (Philenews, 2023c). The Initiative, which quickly gained the support of the two smaller trade unions in the public sector, the Independent Union of Cyprus' Public Employees – ASDYK (Independent Union of Cyprus' Public Employees, 2023) and the trade union Isotita, went as far as to threaten the government with a strike (Philenews, 2023d). The government negotiated an agreement regarding this issue only with the largest trade union in the public sector PASYDY, PEO and SEK by the end of October, resulting to the cancellation of the strike (Reporter, 2023). However, until the end of November the government refused to make the contents of the agreement public, prompting the three trade unions to express fear that the agreement will not be respected (Adamos A., 2023b). Despite the subsequent government meeting with the three trade unions, it was revealed that the government aimed to exclude the lowest of its low-paid employees from the provisions of the agreement. This rekindled the dispute, with the three trade unions continuing negotiations, while Isotita, threatened with a strike if an all-inclusive agreement was not reached (Adamos A., 2023d). To understand the multifacetedness of this dispute, it is necessary to highlight that the majority of potentially excluded employees are members of Isotita, is not allowed to negotiate with the government, an issue that Isotita took to the courts in 2023 (Makrides, 2023). During the dispute, the government stated that it is the other trade unions which prevent the participation of Isotita (Philenews, 2023e). Moreover, the three trade unions which were negotiating with the government made announcements against the strike (AlphaNews, 2023c).

Despite the aforementioned efforts of trade unions, the strike did go forward as negotiations were ongoing. It began with a 48-hour strike on December 4 which was followed, when an agreement was not accomplished, by another 24-hour strike one week later (Philenews, 2023f), this time joined by the circa 300 members of Isotita working for the postal services. During the week between the two strikes, political parties, including the two largest opposition parties (the Democratic Rally and the Progressive Party of Working People), made public their support of the low-paid employees (Philenews, 2023g). The second strike was supposed to last until Friday December 15, with the post office workers also organising an overtime strike for after the holidays (Philenews, 2023b), however all industrial action was cancelled when an agreement was announced the following day, December 12 (Christou L., 2023a). The agreement was in essence an acceptance of the position of the government with only a mention that within 2024, the issue with the lowest-paid public employees will be sorted out. As such, 1,300 public employees remained excluded (Daniil, 2023). The agreement was signed by PASYDY and SEK, but not PEO, which claimed that the agreement was beneficial for most employees, but it could not condone the exclusion of the rest and the division of the public workforce (Christou L., 2023a). A similar position was held by ASDYK (Stockwatch, 2023), while Isotita, despite canceling the industrial action, has announced that it will challenge the decision in court (Cyprus News Agency, 2023f).

Not all labour disputes of 2023 have resulted in industrial action, however. One such salient example is the negotiation for the renewal of the collective agreement in the construction sector, an agreement which has expired in May 2022. The primary point of contention is the trade unions' demand to include the agreed-upon entry wages in the legislation (see the section Data on collective bargaining for clarification), something that employers are firmly against. The year ended without a

resolution despite the intervention of the government. The intervention of the Mediation services of the Ministry of Labour, together with five to six consultation meetings held in 2024 with the parties, did not result to an outcome. As informed by a trade unionist of PEO, the issue is now referred to the Minister of Labour and both parties wait for him to respond. When a similar situation occurred in 2013, the subsequent strike was the largest sectoral strike in the history of the Republic (Christou L., 2023b).

Another salient example regards the employability of the workforce from third countries, especially in the hospice sector. The employers in this sector are complaining that they cannot find enough Cypriot or European Union workers to work for them. The previous government has already introduced a new strategy regarding this issue in 2022, without any process of social dialogue, in an effort to satisfy the employers. As that was not deemed enough by employers, and since trade unions were vocally against the new strategy, the new government begun a process of social dialogue on the matter. However, employers are asking for further relaxation for the criteria necessary for the employment of third-country nationals, further increase in the maximum numbers, abolishment of the limitations in the employability of students, and certain limitations of the rights of foreign workers. Trade unions, which are declaring their protestations on the issue since the new strategy was introduced, demand clarification that only employers who have signed and do not violate collective agreements must be allowed to employ more workers from third countries, as well as the reintroduction of technical committees to investigate and advise whether an employer follows the collective agreements and the labour legislation (Adamou A., 2024). The consultation process resulted in an agreement reached in May 2024.

Developments in working time

Changes to legislation

Unlike during previous years, there were no major changes to the legislation regarding working time in 2023. A relevant legislation was the new law regarding telework, which included, after much debate, a specific reference to the right to disconnect, as well as a general reference regarding the obligations of the employee when it comes to tele-readiness, its response times and its time limits (Cyprus Bar Association, 2023).

The other relevant development was the fact that late 2023 saw the beginning of the discussion in Parliament, regarding extending the maternity leave. In November, the president announced that the government is considering increasing maternity leave for the first child from 18 to 22 weeks, and paid paternity leave to eight weeks (Prakas, 2023). Three additional proposals have been made by some political parties, one to increase maternity leave from 18 weeks to 26 for the first child, a second to extend the period during which a mother can make use of maternity leave until the 15th year of the child (instead of the current 8th year) and a third to extend the number of days of the maternity leave of mothers whose infants are hospitalized immediately after birth in incubators for as long as the hospitalization lasts (Psillou, 2023 & Panayiotou, 2023 & Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation, 2023b).

Bargaining outcomes

No significant relevant bargaining outcomes were identified.

Debates on duration and organisation

The only relevant debate took place in the framework of the social dialogue process regarding the revision of the National Minimum Wage. As mentioned in the “Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism” section, trade unions demanded the specification of an hourly minimum wage, either directly or through the specification of the working hours per week that the minimum wage would correspond to (Aggelodimou, 2023b). Employers vehemently opposed such an amendment of the previous decree, and as a result it was not included in the new decree (Christou J., 2023).

Other important policy developments

Regulations on employment status and contracts

In November 2023, the House of Representatives voted in legislation the bill that provides for the regulation of telework. The 'Law for the establishment of a framework for the organization of telework' (N120(I)2023) covers telework in the private sector only, provides the definition of telework and ensures the rights and responsibilities of both employees and employers. According to the law, telework is optional and agreed among employer and employee upon writing during recruitment, amendment of the employment contract, and/or through the collective agreement. The law also provides for the teleworking arrangements including the working hours, data protection and the right to disconnect. It ensures that teleworkers enjoy the same rights with the workers working from the employers' premises including the workload, the criteria for the evaluation of employees, the access to information, the training and career development, the trade union activity and the uninterrupted and confidential communication with trade union representatives.

Policies to reduce the gender pay-gap

Two policies that indirectly and potentially reduce the gender pay-gap has been taken in 2023. The one is related to the change of the employment status of the educators working for the afternoon and evening programmes of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. The problem started back in 2013 with the decision of the government to change the employment status of this group of educators from employees to self-employees. The change of the employment status presupposes that educators would have to pay increased social security contributions. They also lost, as self-employees, the right for the unemployment allowance for the summer months when no classes are taking place, the right for pay leave absences and the pay during public holidays. Apart from the loss of income and benefits, an issue of unequal treatment of the evening educators in comparison with other groups of educators of the Ministry of Education has been created. The change affected around 5,000 educators, who were in their great majority female. Despite two court decision that the change of the employment status of the educators was illegal, Anastasiades' government refused to comply with the decision of the court. In March 2023, the newly appointed Minister of Education started a consultation process with the stakeholders for the resolution of the problem. In late September 2023, an agreement has been reached among the stakeholders providing that this group of educators will be working with fix-term employment contracts, corresponding to the employment contracts of the Public Employment Service, for the academic year 2023-2024. The stakeholders also agreed to continue the dialogue for the functioning of the afternoon and evening programmes of the Ministry of Education and the employment of educators in the next coming years.

The second policy, the introduction of the 'National Minimum Wage' and its revision towards the end of the year (see above sections for details), may also reduce the gender pay-gap because it addresses sectors of the labour market without collective agreement and low skill and paid workers in service occupations, retail trade and personal and cleaning services, which are predominated by female workers.

Health and safety regulations and policies

The House of Representatives voted for the amendment of the occupational safety law providing the end of prolonged periods of standing at the workplace. Article 27 of the 'Occupational safety and health amendment law' (Law no. 165(I)/2023) provides that where the workplace involves prolonged standing duties, the employer is required to provide suitable seating or to take organizational measures for the rest of employees. The amendment harmonized Cyprian legislation with the provisions of the European Directive 89/391/EEC on the implementation of measures to encourage improvements on safety and health of workers, and the Directive 89/654/EEC regarding the minimum safety and health requirements for the workplace.

Life-long learning and skills development

The Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA) continues to provide the life-long learning and skills developments in 2023 through the accredited Vocational and Training Centers and the Cyprus Productivity Center (KEPA), addressed both to unemployed persons and employees. The current usual programmes provided are:

- Vocational Training Programmes for the Unemployed
- Vocational Training Scheme for the Long-Term Unemployed in Companies/Organisations
- Business Staffing Scheme for Graduates of Tertiary Education
- Special Vocational Training Scheme for the Unemployed in Public and Wider Public Sector
- Single Business Training Programs in Cyprus
- Single Business Training Programs Abroad
- Continuing Training Programs for Trade Union Officials
- E-Learning Supplement

Since 2022, HRDA also provides the following programmes related with the blue, green and digital transition:

- Digital Skills Vocational Training Programmes
- Training Programmes for the Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills related to the Green Economy
- Training Programmes for the Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills related to the Blue Economy

The Cyprus Productivity Center (KEPA) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurances represents Cyprus in the EU organization for the promotion of skills WorldSkills Europe. As the responsible agency, KEPA organized the 7th national skills competition SkillsCyprus 2023 in March 2023. The winners of the six categories – cooking, waiting, dry construction, cooling system technician, welder and beautician – participated in the Euroskills 2023 in September 2023 in Gdansk, Poland.

In June 2023, the President of the Republic and the Minister of Labour and Social Insurances presented at a press conference the Action Plan titled 'Modern Professional Development for the Green and Digital Transition' of the European Year of Skills 2023. The aim of the plan is the upskilling and reskilling of various target groups focusing on vulnerable groups including NEETs, disable persons and inactive women. The three pillars of the Action Plan are: (1) developing a modern professional culture, (2) providing professional training to vulnerable groups to enhance social

cohesion and (3) promoting professional expertise and certification. The plan is funded by the European Social Fund+ under the national cohesion policy programme 'Thalia 2021-2027', the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRF) and the HRDA.

Commentary and outlook

Cyprus elected a new government in February 2023, which took office on 1 March 2023. The new president and more particularly the newly appointed Minister of Labour and Social Insurance, Mr Yannis Panayiotou, inherited a loaded labour agenda from the previous government. At the end of 2023, he had registered some successes.

The most pressing dispute the new minister dealt with was the cost-of-living allowance (COLA), which became a major issue in the second half of 2022 and beginning of 2023. Trade unions organised a three-hour general strike in January 2023 over the COLA and threatened to escalate their action after the presidential elections in February. In May, Mr Panayiotou brokered a revision to the 2017 COLA agreement between the trade unions and employer organisations, increasing the COLA payment from 50% of the annual increase in the Consumer Price Index to 66.67%. Similar to the 2017 COLA agreement, it is a provisional measure and will expire at the end of June 2025. That means the minister has a year and a half left to broker a permanent agreement, which he considers to be one of his hardest challenges in 2024.

The new government updated the minimum wage decree without changing certain disputed features of the statutory wage regime introduced on 1 January 2023; for example, the minimum wage rates are still defined only in monthly terms. The hourly definition, which was one of the main demands of trade unions, was left to be addressed within the process of national harmonisation with the EU's Minimum Wage Directive, anticipated to be completed by the end of 2024. The government updated the two minimum wage rates: the entry rate was increased by 1.7% to €900 and the six-months seniority rate by 6.4% to €1,000. With these increases, the government parted from a tradition of uniform evolution of the two minimum wage rates in which the entry rate and the six-months seniority rate evolved evenly for certain professional groups. The new rates took effect on 1 January 2024 and remain valid until the end of 2025.

Under the new minimum wage regime and for the first time in the history of the minimum wage in Cyprus, a tripartite expert committee was formed in October 2023 and submitted its report for the readjustment of minimum wage rates in December 2023. The Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance extended the committee's work into 2024 with the tasks of developing a formula to facilitate the calculation of the readjustment criteria and setting out the research and studies needed to be commissioned to support the work of the committee.

No breakthrough was reached in 2023 on the other two pressing issues: the new employment strategy for third-country nationals and the reconsideration of 12% actuarial cut to pensions for those who retire before the age of 65. Two separate tripartite technical committees were tasked with examining these issues again, but according to media reports, negotiations stalled. Most probably the issues will return to the minister's office in the coming months for further consideration.

Finally, the negotiations for the renewal of the country's most important sectoral collective agreements are expected to be extremely controversial in 2024. The collective agreement in the construction industry expired in May 2022 and has not been renewed since, while the agreement in the accommodation industry expired at the end of 2023. Besides pay increases, further controversial issues include the introduction of extension mechanisms for the whole agreement in the

accommodation industry and the major provisions of the construction industry agreement (including pay).

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