

Targeting employers

GREECE has clashed with European Union heavyweights Germany and Sweden over plans to combat black-market labour by advocating an EU-wide crackdown on employers who exploit undocumented migrant workers.

During talks with the EU's justice and interior ministers in Brussels last week, Greece's interior minister, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, argued for the criminalisation of employers who hire undocumented migrant workers. But eight EU members, including Germany, Sweden, Poland and the Netherlands, opposed this plan. They said each state should be allowed to decide how to deal with the issue.

Pavlopoulos, however, stressed that an EU-wide policy targeting employers is necessary to combat the exploitation of undocumented migrant workers - a source of cheap labour. He stressed that administrative sanctions like fines are not enough.

The draft law tabled by the European Commission proposes tough sanctions for employers, such as fines (including costs of deporting undocumented migrants), payment of outstanding wages, taxes and social security contributions, as well as various administrative measures, including loss of subsidies (including EU funding) for up to five years and a five-year ban from public contracts.

EU member states would also be free to choose between fines or a jail sentence for offenders.

Greek immigration law (3386/2005) is tough on employers. The law explicitly states that it is illegal to employ an immigrant who does not hold a residence permit. It also says that



LEFT: Interior Minister Prokopis Pavlopoulos argued with his EU counterparts over plans to crack down on employers exploiting undocumented migrant workers

employers who do so may be fined between 3,000 and 15,000 euros for each illegally-employed immigrant and may also face a prison sentence of at least three months.

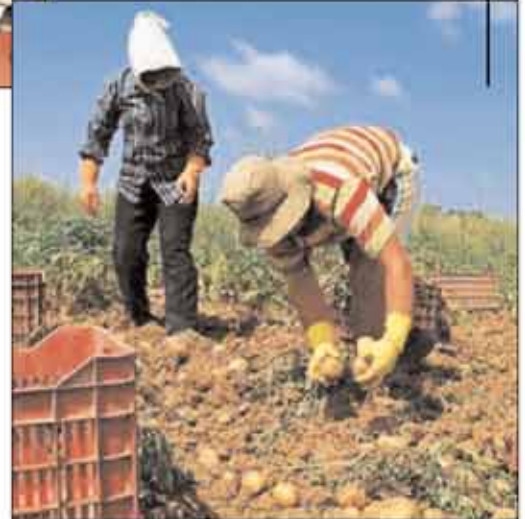
But the problem in Greece, as in the rest of Europe, is that checks are rare. According to the European Commission, just over two percent of the 22 million lawfully-established businesses in the 27-member bloc were checked last year. This means that the risk of being discovered is practically non-existent.

According to the General Confederation of Workers in Greece (GSEE), the country's biggest trade union, there are as many as 500,000 undocumented migrant workers living and working in Greece. Alexandros Zavos, the president of the Hellenic Migration Policy Institute (IMEPO), however, puts the number between 180,000 and 250,000.

A case in point

In April thousands of strawberry pickers in Nea Manolada, on the outskirts of Itea in the Peloponnese, demanded fair wages and better living conditions. The Greek government faced mounting criticism for doing lit-

BOTTOM RIGHT: Agriculture is heavily reliant on migrant labour



tle to protect immigrant workers from exploitation by employers. In response, Labour Minister Fani Palli-Petralia ordered labour inspectors to crack the whip on farmers exploiting migrant workers in Greece, starting with Nea Manolada.

Based on a recent Supreme Court ruling, all workers in agriculture - including immigrants who have not entered into a written work contract because of their unauthorised residence status - are protected by the country's General Collective Bargaining Agreement, which entitles them to the legal minimum wage as well as overtime pay - "time and a half" - for each hour beyond the 40 worked in a week.

Immigration sparks disagreement

EUROPEAN Union member states also disagreed about a French proposal for an EU-wide objective of sending inspectors to at least five percent of companies in sectors with the highest levels of illegal employment, which often include construction, hotels and agriculture. "There are other ways to fight illegal employment... Minimum criminal measures are not justified," German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble told ministers in a televised debate.

Schaeuble also opposed any quota for inspections. "It's not the number that counts but the quality," he said.

The EU has beefed up its fight against illegal migration over the past few years but has struggled each time to find a middle ground between diverse national policies.

The European Commission estimates that there are up to 8 million illegal immigrants in the 27-nation bloc and says that illegal employment is the main pull-factor for illegal migration.



Bulgarians buy Greek property on massive scale

Bulgarians, Russians and Ukrainians are buying on a massive scale property in a Greek peninsula of Halkidiki, in spite of the crash of the local real-estate market, the Greek media reported. The prices of houses in Halkidiki are approaching those of the most demanded Thessaloniki Districts, ranging from 2,500 to 3,000 euros per square meter. According to the reports, the buyers' interest is focused mainly in the regions of Cassandra and Sythonia, Naftemporiki daily says.

Bulgarian shepherds eye Greek subsidies

Bulgarian farmers, disgruntled with their government's refusal to approve the payment of European Union livestock subsidies, have decided to cross the border with their sheep, hoping for more favorable treatment in Greece.

According to reports from Sofia, the farmers, in Bulgaria's southeastern province bordering on Thrace, said they had resorted to this decision hoping to register their livestock on the other side of the border and receive subsidies from Greece. It was unclear how the crossing would be made, especially since the route chosen, the Kirtzali-Komotini road, has been closed for some time.

The Bulgarian government has appeared reluctant to disburse subsidies after the European Commission warned that farmers might have to return any subsidies received if they were deemed to be state aid incompatible with EU regulations.

Families furious at empty swimming seats

Parents of Australian Olympic swimmers are furious at the number of empty seats at Beijing's National Aquatics Centre, when they can't get tickets to watch their children swim for gold. Australian swimmers were allocated two tickets each per session by the Australian Olympic Committee, but some swimmers require many more for siblings and partners. Parents of Olympic Swimmers (PoOS) spokeswoman Colette Rickard, mother of breaststroker Brenton Rickard, said they had fought hard to find extra tickets for family members but many would miss vital semis and finals. The Beijing Olympic organisers say all sports are sold out, however dozens of empty seats are clearly visible in the Water Cube. Mrs Rickard said the sight made the parents furious.

"God, yes, it makes our blood boil, let me tell you," she told AAP. "Some of the corporate people come in three quarters of the way through an event, and we have got family members just desperate to get in there and they're sitting outside. It's just criminal." Mrs Rickard said the AOC had done its best to get the families tickets, but the problem was with the Beijing organisers and the entire ticketing system.

She said 80 per cent of tickets had been reserved for the

Chinese, and it appeared BOCOG had made corporate sponsors a priority.

"I think if you ask the athletes, they would tell you that their priority is to have their family in watching them before anyone else," she said. "The system has failed for so long. The IOC (International Organising Committee) needs to set up a proforma and tell the organising committee this is the way they need to do it."

Mrs Rickard said some of the major Olympic sponsors had helped them find additional tickets, but some people would still miss out. She said they had four family members in Beijing to watch Brenton, but only three tickets to his semi-final and final.

AOC media director Mike Tancred said it had achieved its ticket allocation and the number of tickets was an issue for BOCOG. "All of us would like to see their every single session, but that's obviously dreaming," Mrs Rickard said.

The problem is not limited to Australia, with the Canadians experiencing similar frustrations and one Brazilian woman standing outside the Water Cube in Beijing holding up a sign saying she needed a ticket to see her daughter swim.