

*Employers' federation chief seeks to curb industrial action in essential services*

# OEB seeks to end crippling strikes

**CYPRUS** Employers Federation chief Michalis Antoniou believes Union expectations are too high

By **Annie Charalambous**

**W**ith Nicosia exiting the bailout programme, the Cyprus Employers' Federation's new boss believes a law restricting strike action in essential services is now paramount.

The OEB federation has drafted its own proposals on curbing strikes at hospitals and state utilities because the economy is fragile and the expectations of unions are unjustifiably high, Michalis Antoniou told the Cyprus Weekly in an interview.

"Since the end of 2014 when the economy showed signs of stability we knew that those in control of essential services were getting

ready to come up with an avalanche of demands," said Antoniou. He has been at the helm of OEB since February 1.

"We knew they could blackmail the whole of society but we also knew that the state can be in a position to defend itself. That's why we prepared this bill

proposal, it took us over nine months," he added.

The draft document which has already been sent to President Nicos Anastasiades and four key ministers - Labour, Finance, Commerce and Health - could be voted in within 2016.

The government will be the one to hold a dialogue with trade unions, if this is deemed necessary, he said.

"We also sent them (government officials) a study carried out by the European Trade Union Confederation on how strike action in essential services is regulated in 30 European states - 28 members plus two - Iceland and Norway."

"And we sent the message that if you don't like our proposed bill, study how other European countries have done it and draft your own. Regulate it though, one way or another," he added.

Last week, nurses decided to end a two-week-long strike that almost paralysed the island's state hospitals where efforts are under way to restructure the health system.

This is a move to give hospitals autonomy and introduce the much-anticipated National Health Scheme which appears to be as controversial as the move to reform the Electricity Authority of Cyprus (EAC) and Cyta (Cyprus Telecommunications).

"If a strike breaks out at an essential service, it is not the employer who suffers, the one who suffers is the unprotected citizen, whether it is the patient at a public hospital or the owner of a small business...just imagine if we have power cuts because of EAC's privatisation plans," said Antoniou.

"The damage would be unbelievably enormous...Economy has a face, it is the shopkeeper, the small-or medium-size business owner, the producer who needs to ship goods abroad and can't because port workers are on strike. These, too, are voters; this is a message party leaders should bear in mind."

Top of the list of OEB's goals is also the speeding up of the state's structural reform process which seems to have lost its momentum, according to Antoniou.

As well as reform of the state's pension fund to alleviate the injustice towards taxpayers in the private sector, compared to those in the public sector.

OEB's boss also wants the state payroll to be downsized considering that before the economic crisis it was at 15.7% of GDP.

"It has been lowered now to 12.3% of GDP, but the average rate in the eurozone is 10% and we have to lower it to about the same percentage rate."

*'Economy has a face; it is the shopkeeper, the medium-size business owner, the producer who needs to ship goods abroad'*

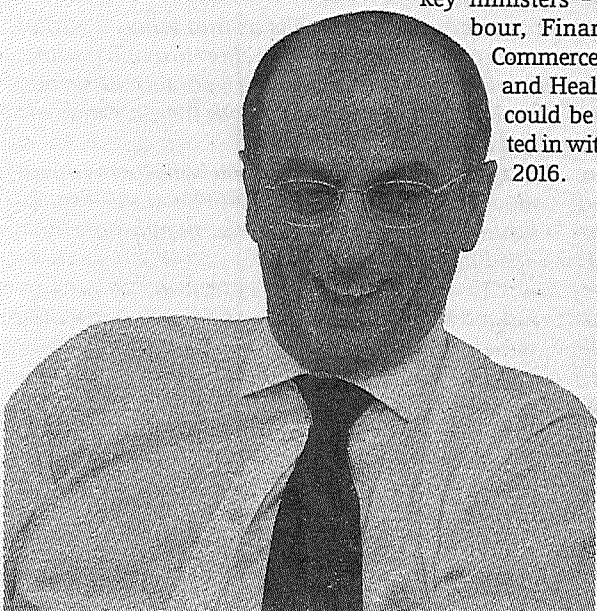


Photo: Stefanos Kouratzis



**OEB PREMISES:** Situated on Nikis Avenue, central Nicosia

## From builder to leader

Nicosia-born Michalis Antoniou joined OEB in 1991, the same year he got married to Soteroulla - a certified accountant who runs her own business.

They have two daughters, aged 22 and 23, both of whom are students at highly-prestigious European universities.

Michalis studied law at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and earned a post-graduate degree from Cardiff University, Wales.

"I worked in construction as an unskilled labourer for nine months before I got this job, I needed the money. I'm very proud of those nine months."

"I'm also proud of the fact that I got my law degree from the Kapodistrian University within four years, I must have been the only law student in Greece in those days that actually got his degree within four years." For decades, university students in Greece were notorious for never finishing a degree on time.