

**Euro ministers hail Greek pension reform as lawyers protest in Athens**

Europe

14.01.2016

By our dpa-correspondent and Europe Online    ****  ****

Brussels (dpa) - Eurozone finance ministers welcomed Thursday a controversial pension reform proposed by the Greek government, hours after thousands of lawyers took to the streets of Athens to protest against the measure.

Greece has been required to implement painful economic reforms as part of international bailouts that have prevented the country from going bankrupt. Its creditors have demanded a reform of the Greek pension system in exchange for further financial aid.

The proposal brought forward by the Greek government will hit farmers the hardest, according to local media. Their pension contributions are expected to rise from seven to 20 per cent by 2019.

The Greek lawyers‘ association, meanwhile, has estimated that the new law would increase the pension and healthcare contributions of self-employed workers by 223 per cent.

A young lawyer earning 20,000 euros (21,790 dollars) a year would have to pay 14,000 euros in pension contributions, taxes and healthcare contributions under the new law, according to the president of the lawyers‘ association in Athens.

"It is a catastrophe," Vasilis Alexandris said, arguing that the money left over is not enough to live on.

Most Greek lawyers were refusing to work Thursday for a third consecutive day, in protest at the reform proposal. More than 2,000 of them marched through central Athens, local media reported.

Other unions are also up in arms. Doctors and pharmacists plan to take to the streets in coming days, while farmers‘ associations have threatened to block the country‘s main traffic arteries.

But Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has argued that the reform is absolutely necessary, saying that Greek pension funds would otherwise run dry in five years.

His government‘s proposal met with approval in Brussels, where eurozone finance ministers were meeting Thursday.

"It‘s a serious proposal," said Dutch Finance Minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem, who leads the ministers‘ Eurogroup panel.

"Greece is making big efforts," German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble added.

But EU Economy Commissioner Pierre Moscovici warned that there remained "a lot of things to discuss," while Dijsselbloem said it remains to be assessed if the proposed new pension system is financially sustainable.

The pension reform is a key part of a bailout review that creditors are expected to start next week. A completion of that review would pave the way for a highly anticipated discussion on Greek debt relief and on the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Dijsselboem said Athens "accepts that the IMF needs to be part of the [bailout] process." The Washington-based fund has at times taken a tougher stance on Greece than the eurozone.