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Greece

“When injustice becomes the law, resistance is a duty!”

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV425 - June 2010 -

Publication date: Wednesday 30 June 2010

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The above sentence, inscribed on the common banner of DOE and OLME, the two trade unions of primary and secondary education, in a demonstration on May 12, summarizes very well both the analysis of the situation and the only road which is left to workers faced with the social catastrophe inflicted by the PASOK government.

This resistance seems obvious, and the enormous mobilizations of the past weeks could confirm it, but we should not have any illusions: it is a difficult battle that we are engaged in, the outcome of which will mainly depend on the ability of the trade-union and political left to offer credible perspectives to the population, split between mass combativeness and the risk of giving in to discouragement faced with the size of the obstacles, and on the ability of the European working class to counter this offensive of European capital.

In what is already now a race between classes, the brutal aggravation of the crisis in Greece presents a series of extremely opposite paradoxes quite contradictory with each other. On the one hand we can indeed say, like Alain Krivine on May 15 in Athens, that “what is happening in Greece, which will lead to situations of distress for millions of people, is from a certain point of view positive for all European revolutionaries, because from a certain point of view, you (the Greeks) are in the forefront of what all of us will experience in Europe in the coming months and years (...) and because today, the majority of people are suddenly becoming aware that the European Union, far from being the saviour of the peoples, is a machine for oppressing and exploiting them.” But on the other hand, one should not underestimate the significance of the remarks of Prime Minister Papandreou, stressing that the crisis represents a great opportunity to change Greek society: “We must now ensure that our country has solid foundations for a better future. We have to speak openly and honestly about the problems for which we Greeks are responsible.” Now, Papandreou could in this way concentrate popular anger on a real cause, though obviously minor in the crisis that is taking place: the tax evasion in which various rich sections of society have been engaged for years has led over the last few days to big revelations in the press and on TV: after hearing about doctors, we have been promised that in the coming days we will know the names of tax-dodging sportsmen, lawyers and show business people, and Papandreou did not hesitate to sacrifice one of his ministers, whose husband, a popular singer, had the unfortunate idea of owing 5.5 million euros to the tax office! This challenging of practices that are intolerable to impoverished workers is of course important, but it in no way represents an answer to the deep roots of the crisis and is an attempt to send a population which is starting to take its problems in hand back to playing the role of passive spectator!

Measures that take us back to the Middle Ages

Let us recall [1] that in February and March, workers had already been hit by “packages” of measures. The worst was to come: pressured by speculation that was free and unrestricted (as competition is in the European Constitution...), the government negotiated with the European Union (EU), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the IMF a loan of 110 billion euros which was agreed in principle at the beginning of May. The details are well-known:

– a rate of interest of almost 5 per cent: the countries of the EU which lend money themselves borrow at a rate of 3 per cent from the banks, which alone have the right to borrow from the ECB at a rate of one per cent! As the French Economy Minister Christine Lagarde shamelessly admitted, this solidarity of the countries of the eurozone will earn France 150 million euros a year.

– putting all the sectors of the Greek economy under the control of the EU-ECB-IMF “troika”: this real political dispossession of a sovereign state reinforces the anger of a population which does not hesitate to use the word

“junta”, knowing full well what it is saying, having experienced from 1967 to 1974 a military junta backed and kept in place by the United States. It is however important not to forget that the Greek employers, who are big investors in the countries of the Balkans and of whom certain sectors (ship-owners) are world leaders, takes its full share of this plan, which it wishes to make harsher just as much as the IMF does!

The measures, voted by the Parliament on May 6, result from the memorandum set out by the troika: they sharply aggravate the preceding packages and correspond to a search for savings of the order of 30 billion euros...exclusively on the back of the workers. Among those which have already been implemented: an immediate 15 per cent wage cut (which takes the form, in the civil service, of the suppression of the thirteenth and fourteenth months); the same for pensions, with a maximum payment of 800 euros a month 800 euros maximum; new tax increases (with an increase in VAT, with an increase in two months from 19 to 23 per cent on certain products); a virtual freeze on recruitment in the public sector (one worker hired for every five who leave)... But this is only a part of the picture: since these measures were adopted a project for the reform of the pension system is under discussion (lengthening of the duration of contributions, towards 40 years of instalments, which means an increase of between 2 and 7 years compared to the existing situation, level of pension calculated on the total wages of a working life and no longer on the last years...) and other attacks are coming: in June, a draft law on the labour code, which is too generous in the eyes of the EU, the IMF... and SEV, the Greek employers' organization. Already, it has been made possible to sack employees of the state education system, but what the IMF in particular demands, as announced by its very socialist president, is more flexibility in order to "offer" more competition and possibilities of removing the current limits on sackings (even though it has been decided to raise from 2 to 4 per cent the monthly percentage of dismissals that are authorised in a company, that is not enough!). In the same way, whatever his entourage says, the same Strauss-Kahn insists that the wage measures inflicted on the public sector should also apply to the private sector, and the government wants to be able to reduce the minimum wage from 740 to 592 euros! The memorandum signed by the PASOK government thus envisages the implementation of about thirty measures between now and 2012: among them, a reduction of 500 million euros in the financing of the unemployment agency, in a situation where the unemployment figures, officially around 10 per cent, unofficially 18 per cent, will rise dramatically; a three-year wage freeze in both private and public sectors, wages that are flexible, taking account of productivity, lower payment for overtime, a rise in the prices of public services, not forgetting that they are going to be privatized... The character of these measures is recognized by the Prime Minister himself: hard, unjust measures for workers who are not responsible for the crisis... but for Papandreou it is the only possible way! To transform social skills into a field of ruins, that is the only possible policy for the leader of PASOK!

However, even economists who are not necessarily on the left question the effectiveness of such a plan: Joseph Stiglitz underlines this in *Le Monde* of May 24: "Europe needs solidarity, empathy. Not an austerity which will make unemployment shoot up and lead to a depression. (...) Today, these countries (Spain, Greece) will only recover if European growth returns. That is why it is necessary to support the economy by investing and not cripple it by austerity programmes." And the recession is calculated (by the troika and the IMF) for this year at about 4 per cent, and the same for 2011... proof, if it was necessary, that what European bourgeoisie wants, in the case of Greece, is not a way out of the crisis, but a sharply increased superexploitation of workers, which will become the European social model...

Under these conditions, one of the first preoccupations of the population is of course unemployment, made worse by the fact that one worker in four is not declared by his or her employer. Poverty, already present in the big cities and in some regions, will rapidly increase, but it is in particular for young people (and the elderly) that the prospects are quite simply terrifying: whereas the unemployment rate for those under 24 is 32 per cent, the future holds at best a job paid at less than 600 euros a month in the first two years, a prospect of retirement calculated on the wages of their entire life. Meanwhile, the annual salary of Strauss Kahn is 300,000 euros... That explains the strength of popular anger!

Massive mobilisations

Of course, it is interesting to examine the various surveys which show a contrasted, even contradictory image of the state of mind of the population in the face of a degradation of their conditions of existence on a scale that they had never experienced: the surveys show both the determination to protest and the feeling of the difficulty of the task, made worse in Greece by the neglect of previous governments: this last point is important, it explains why PASOK, shaken, does not collapse. But that is not what is most important: in four months, Greece has experienced four one-day general strikes, in a particular framework of mobilization, without forgetting the very combative demonstrations of particular sectors, or those demonstrations called at a day's notice. Indeed, whereas the leaderships of GSEE (the confederation of private sector workers) and ADEDY (the federation of public sector workers), in both of which PASOK is in the majority, have every reason not to mobilize against “their” government, they had no choice but to give in to the pressure exerted since December by the trade-union left. Admittedly, after the big strikes of February 24 and March 11, they have “played for time”, but with the strike of May 5, which immobilized the country, we saw hundreds of thousands of demonstrators (the figure was given of 200,000 in Athens). It was the biggest workers’ demonstration since the fall of the dictatorship, in 1974, and comparable to the huge demonstration which in 2001 forced PASOK to retreat on its projected law on pensions). It will represent a key date in the history of the Greek workers’ movement. Such an open and massive outpouring of anger had seldom been seen; an anger that directly challenged the capitalist system and its agents: no question of paying for “their” crisis, no to the PASOK-EU-IMF-ECB measures, that was the tone of the demonstrations. In Athens, the gigantic demonstration was marked by two facts: on the one hand, the tragic death of three employees of the Marfin Bank, owned by one of the most powerful Greek employers, because of the attitude of the employers and the government, which was denounced by the Federation of bank workers (OTOE) and of the criminal violence of those who threw Molotov cocktails in spite of the visible presence of a score of employees in the building. This act, very strongly denounced, in particular by many anarchist groups, led on the one hand to an incredible level of police violence that was a worrying indication of the state of bourgeois democracy, and was of course exploited by the government and the owner of the bank, obviously putting brakes on the possibility of a rapid extension of the mobilizations. Because on the other hand, we saw thousands of demonstrators, young and old, of all political tendencies, attacking the Parliament as the symbolic site where the pro-capitalist measures had been adopted, openly confronting the “forces of order”. And the following day, in spite of the emotion caused by the death of the three workers, more than 10,000 demonstrators assembled in front of the Parliament when the first section of the terrible measures ordered by the troika was being adopted.

On May 20, a new general strike took place, also well supported, even though the demonstrations, while massive, were not as big as on May 5.

What will happen now? It is difficult to see, but at present, we should note the following elements:

– the trade-union leaderships linked to PASOK have been forced to follow the movement and to call for mobilizations. Once again, it has been demonstrated that these bureaucrats know how to adapt and use left language. Let us listen to the president of GSEE, Giannis Panagopoulos: “the IMF will not stop asking for sacrifices from the working class. Its recipes are catastrophic. The government must firmly reject them. In Greece, we cannot say that in fact the wages of the private sector create a problem of competitiveness of the economy...”, and the leadership of GSEE can chant, as on May 1, that this it is not up to the workers to pay for “their” crisis! However, it is clear that it is trying to temporize: a month and a half between the general strike in March and the one on May 5, then they had to speed things up very quickly. And with the strike of May 20, it is to be feared that the tactics are from now on to call a series of one-day strikes, well spaced out, which we know will end up by not being supported.

The division between workers is fostered by the trade-union fraction of the KKE (with its trade-union front PAME), which systematically invites issues calls to demonstrate elsewhere and often at different times from the majority of the unions. Nevertheless, this tactic started to be countered on the ground on May 5, where the different contingents found themselves side by side, with no animosity on either side. This was a bad example in the eyes of the Stalinist

leadership, which made a call on May 20 to demonstrate in another direction from the march called by GSEE and ADEDY, who called for a demonstration to the Parliament...

A very important role has been played over the last few months by local trade union structures (workplace branches, regional committees) in pushing for mobilization: for one-day general strikes, and today for ongoing strikes, which could be launched in some sectors. A coordinating committee of these local union structures has been set up. We should also mention some combative and unitary federations: for example OLME and DOE – with the new measures teachers will lose at least an entire month’s wages because of the measures, not to mention the threats to their status and the readiness of the IMF to take advantage of the crisis to impose more private education in Greece, something which has been denounced by the president of Education International (a worldwide trade union body of workers in education). These federations are openly discussing the perspectives for ongoing strikes. All these organizations are of course very combative poles in the demonstrations!

What made the success of mobilizations like the one on May 5 is obviously that fact that hundreds of thousands of workers who give the majority in the unions to the PASOK current took to the streets en masse, angry, to say the least, at having been betrayed by “their” government. However, this anger does not result in a disavowal of the unions, nor indeed of their political loyalties. But on the other hand, this immense force is very ready for united action.

What perspectives for the mobilizations?

It is obvious that mass combativeness will be strengthened or weakened depending on the mobilisations that take place, either those launched by GSEE and ADEDY, or the extension of an exemplary ongoing strike, something which is cruelly lacking at present, because it could also be a concrete point of support for European solidarity in action. Today, the risk is of course that the trade-union leaderships on the one hand, and on the other hand the government with its campaigns of tracking down those guilty of tax evasion, try to put the brakes on possible mobilizations. Many political and trade-union cadres consider that it is especially after the summer holidays that the mobilizations will begin again, after everyone has seen the scale of the disaster, with the systematic implementation of the measures that have been adopted (for example, the suppression of the fourteenth month’s salary paid in summer, a kind of holiday pay). That is possible, but the risk also exists that the cost of a strike slows down the workers more in autumn. So it is important that the mobilization continues and if possible deepens now, but that also implies a clarification of the political perspectives, which gives confidence for a victorious conclusion of the mobilizations. However, on this front, things are moving forward, certainly, but very slowly...

Today it is becoming seen as correct on the left of to address the PASOK “people”: so much the better, it was not always the case! At the same time, it is clear that possible differentiations will not lead inevitably to the strengthening of the anti-capitalist or anti-liberal left! Discontent can be seen especially on the level of the apparatus: thus, 3 MPs refused to vote for the vicious measures, and they were expelled. They do not however constitute the core of a future left opposition. Their attitude has more to do with a mood of discontent that has even affected some ministers, who are worried about their political future. However, the opinion polls show that, alongside a phenomenon - which could become serious - of rejection of political parties, PASOK is well ahead, accentuating even its lead over the Right. Even the student elections, which have just been held, show a progression of the PASOK current (which came out against the measures...). On the other hand, it is in PASKE, the trade-union current of PASOK, that we are starting to hear more or less strong criticism: even the president of ADEDY challenges the government’s line that there is only one way to deal with the crisis. The leader of PASKE in the public services has declared that “we need social justice and class solidarity”. PASKE trade unionists in several ministries are making accusations of tax evasions, of the existence of offshore companies, and thus showing that the money is there. PASKE trade unionists in DEI (Greece’s electricity company) declare: “We oppose everything that has just been officially smashed, but we also oppose the new attacks that are coming... Our perspective remains that of a more just society, freed from the

economic and moral wretchedness of the present time.” It is difficult to know what echo these declarations have (we have taken the information from Eleftherotypia, May 23), but they express an undeniable fact: PASOK, which has survived all the (many) scandals and the austerity policies of Papandreou’s father and Simitis, has just crossed a red line, on the other side of which it continued to be seen as an instrument to defeat the Right. The consequences could be radical, if the anti-liberal and anti-capitalist left know how to propose united action and to open clear programmatic perspectives.

What is clear is that the Right is for the moment less than ever in a position to pull itself together, and its leader, the nationalist Antonis Samaras, continues to dig a deeper hole for it, by explaining like Papandreou that faced with the crisis, national unity is needed, but refusing to vote for the measures... which he would of course have taken with even more zeal! By expelling the former Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis, he is leading his party further into a dead end which leaves a bit more space to the far-right party, LAOS, whose leader voted without hesitation for all the PASOK measures, while baying at the Left which was setting the street against parliamentary legality. Coming from a movement that shelters some real fascists, this accusation may seem laughable, but it is clear that the calculation of the Greek caudillo is to play the game of responsibility while hoping to collect disillusioned voters from PASOK and the Right. More than ever, anti-fascist vigilance is necessary in Greece...

One of the factors blocking the situation, especially for future mobilizations, is a Greek particularity, an object of derision for some people, but in fact an element that is at the same time a factor of combativeness and a brake on the hopes of victorious mobilizations: the KKE is more than ever playing this double role, and that is rather tragic when you look at the mess that it results in. In fact, the KKE, directly or through its trade-union current PAME, succeeds in organizing big mobilizations: on May 15, it even made a successful national mobilization of between 20 and 30,000 activists, including quite a lot of young people – a party that had “lost” all its youth at the beginning of the 1990s, after its participation in the government of national union with the Right. Today, the tone is set resolutely on the left, with anti-capitalist accents which would be good news if they were not accompanied by a sectarianism from another age, but also by a political analysis of rare poverty, and thus by the absence of a political perspective, an absence which will soon or later make its sympathisers want to stay at home: in reality, the only reason to mobilize is to reinforce the KKE to the point where it can constitute the popular government (around itself!). When you look at this from outside Greece, it might leave you dumbfounded, but here, such ineptitudes in fact render a service to the system that KKE leader Aleka Pappariga claims to be fighting. Her discourse is an invaluable object for archaeologists: all the Stalinist stereotypes are to be found there. So, the government conducts its campaign and secret services mount provocations against the KKE (this is to contradict the fact that militants of PAME clashed with the police in front of the Parliament on May 5!); the workers are in a bad situation because they did not pay sufficient attention to the timely warnings that the Party made on what Maastricht meant (the people is wrong, the party is always right!). The governmental formula is “an anti-monopolist popular alliance for people’s power” ... Obviously, the regroupments and parties to the left of PASOK are only traps for the unwary, and the KKE never misses an occasion to remind people that Synaspismos (left reformist, the core of the Syriza regroupment) voted for the treaty of Maastricht (which is, besides, true!), but avoids pointing out its own participation in a government around the Right! And beyond the speeches, the current radical line of the KKE quickly shows its limits: although she quite correctly refused to go to a meeting of national unity, of party leaders around the president of the Republic, Pappariga eagerly went to meet Samaras, to discuss with the leader of the Right, who was only too happy for this lucky break, since he was able in this way to show a kind of coalition of those who had refused to vote for the measures!

Concerning the KKE, the question is of course to know what oppositions exist in the face of this blindly sectarian line. There is no answer, except signs from time to time: thus, cadres of the KNE (the youth wing of the KKE) were recently expelled, which could explain a drop in the KKE’s vote in the student elections. In any event, the objective is more than ever to propose unity of action to the KKE, and to make these proposals known to its militants. It seems difficult to imagine in the present context a victorious mobilization against PASOK’s policies without the unitary participation of the KKE current.

It is indisputable that the anti-liberal and anti-capitalist Left is playing a big role in the mobilizations that are taking place, whether in Syriza or in the anti-capitalist regroupment Antarsya. The organization of the local trade union

structures that we mentioned above depends in general on the active presence of these currents, and their contingents in the recent demonstrations were very sizeable. In the same way, coming from certain currents of Syriza or Antarsya, the proposal for unitary committees against the measures goes in the direction of an “all together” movement which could be prepared in the workplaces, in the neighbourhoods, in the university. But beyond these very important initiatives (even though the unitary committees remain far from numerous today), there begin the deficiencies in terms of credible political perspectives, and we must underline them quickly here. As far as Syriza is concerned, the problem is that there is a de facto splintering: even though Syriza appears as a bloc in the demonstrations, the tensions are today very sharp between the majority of Synaspismos and various revolutionary groups. And within Synaspismos, other tensions exist between the “renovator” current, accused by the revolutionary groups of being responsible for everything that goes wrong in Syriza, and the majority current, today itself divided. All that of course makes the political message very confused, and it is difficult to know what the line is, between the leader, Tsipras, who started by protesting against the lack of measures for development in the PASOK plan, then asked for the organization of a referendum on the measures (at the moment when the mobilization was taking place in the streets!), and the former spokesperson Alavanos, who has been demanding for at least two months the resignation of the government. The participation of Alavanos in a recent meeting of Tsipras was refused, and the regroupment that he organized with forces like DEA, KOE and KEDA is organizing a meeting this week in Athens. Officially, everyone wants to continue Syriza... but by refounding it. While we wait for the congress of Synaspismos, which can be a decisive factor [\[2\]](#), the political message of Syriza remains confused, and Alexis Tsipras did exactly like Papariga: he refused to go to the meeting of the party leaders, but got involved in the political manoeuvre of Samaras, who explained, straight-faced, that of course they were not in agreement, but that the situation required a dialogue between the Right and the Left. Very simply, the newspaper Eleftherotypia (centre-left) explained that Samaras had scored a political point by showing that he had succeeded in doing what PASOK could not do: discuss with the Left!

So we can see that in the present context the responsibilities of the Antarsya regroupment are enormous, and the tasks are innumerable. What is sure is that for this regroupment, founded in particular by the two biggest organizations of the revolutionary left and coming from a history where left organizations did not often act together, the past two years show the progress that has been made, with all due respect to those who swear only by electoral results. First of all in the serious character of the analyses: this week again, Panayotis Mavroeidis, a leader of NAR and a cadre of Antarsya, analyzed in a platform the crisis of the left as a crisis of strategy, stressing that unity of action on the left is obviously the minimum that has to be attained. For anyone who knows the long Greek history of self-proclaimed parties which act alone, this development is fundamental, and Antarsya is very actively involved in unitary frameworks, in particular with Syriza or with forces from Syriza. Of course, the analysis of the crisis is a subject of debate within Antarsya, as is the question, actively debated, of whether or not to leave the European Union, and if so how. But what plays an increasingly important role, and represents decisive progress, is that, over and above its ability to mobilize, which meant that for example on May 1, Antarsya had the biggest contingent in the demonstration, there is the conception of Antarsya as an instrument which must serve to address all the other left forces, not excluding, moreover, the KKE, in order to move forward on the question which weighs heavily today on the mobilizations: it is becoming obvious for thousands of workers that the only way to defeat the government’s “plan of stability and development” is to overthrow capitalism, there are no half-measures possible. Consequently, the questions which arise are both enormous and concrete: beyond the correct slogans on the nationalization of the banks, the banning of sackings, wage increases and reduction of working hours..., what government can we form tomorrow to concretize such tasks? In the framework of extending mobilizations and precisely winning these demands, in fact such questions start to arise very concretely, and it is also essential to conduct this discussion in order to avoid the discouragement which could otherwise develop very quickly. But such a discussion now has to be conducted on a European level; it goes without saying that at the moment when the Greek model of anti-working class measures is being extended to other countries of Europe, the anti-capitalist response cannot but have at least a European dimension!

Athens, May 24, 2010

[1] See “Workers against the so-called stability programme”, by Tassos Anastasiadis and Andreas Sartzekis, International Viewpoint 423, April 2010

[2] After this article was written, the congress took place from June 3-6. Most of the “renovator” current split from Synaspismos, taking 4 of Syriza’s 13 MPs