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Greece

# **Cleaners: A handful of women show the way!**

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**Following 11 months of relentless hard struggle, 595 public sector cleaners have become the embodiment, the symbol, the soul, the life itself of the most determined resistance against the politics of austerity in Greece.**

These women have become “political subjects” and the leadership of the current resistance movement in its entirety, having the guts to face up to such powerful enemies as the Greek government, the Central European Bank, the European Commission and the IMF.

However, after 11 months of struggle, having set themselves against the government and the Troika and becoming their main enemy, having short-circuited the implementation of the austerity measures and having a constant presence on the political scene through the mass media, these fighting cleaners are still treated, by opponents of the politics of austerity, as though they are not political subjects.

The fact is that, from the moment the Troika-imposed austerity measures appeared, the women came out en mass on the streets and their resistance displays its own dynamic, with its own specificity which is rich in political lessons.

In the four years of austerity politics which have transformed Greece into a pile of social, economic and above all human ruins, few amongst us have spoken of the lives of the women and of course even less about their struggles against the diktats of the troilka. It was therefore to be expected that public opinion would be shocked by this exemplary fight which is executed exclusively by women. But is this fight really that shocking?

Women have participated en mass in the 26 general strikes. In the “movement of the indignant” they occupied city squares, set out camps, demonstrated. They mobilised at the front line for the occupation and the independent running of ERT. Acting in an exemplary manner, they became the soul of the strike committees of the universities’ admin staff against the “reserve pool” policy, (ie those to be sacked after 8 months, at 75% of their normal salary). 25 000 public servants, women being the majority, will be the victims of staff cuts in the public services. And it is also women that form the vast majority of the volunteers in the Solidarity Movement and the self-managed solidarity health structures that are trying to deal with the human crisis and the collapse of health services.

The mass participation of women in the resistance movements against the demolition of the welfare state and against the politics of austerity, is not surprising and it did not happen by accident. First of all, we all know very well, that women find themselves at the eye of the austerity storm. The dismantling of the welfare state and of their public services, is damaging their lives; forming the majority of the civil servants and of the main users of public services, women are doubly hit by all cuts. They have therefore one thousand reasons not to accept this historic deterioration of their living standards, akin to a return to the 19th century.

It is true that at the beginning women were not differentiated as “women – political subjects”, participating as they were in the same demands and the same forms of action with the men within the various movements. They were simply participating in large numbers.

However, already within the framework of the pioneering struggle against gold extraction at SCOURIES in Chalkidiki, taking on the Canadian multi-national ELDORADO GOLD, the women were rapidly being differentiated through their specific forms of action and their radicalism. And, despite the fact that the press and popular perceptions were ignoring the significance of their gender identity in the way they were fighting, the police did not ignore it. Indeed the opposite, with the MATs (Greece’s special riot control police units) targeting mainly women, using savage and selective measures in order to terrorise the whole population through them and eradicate any form of disobedience

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and any resistance movement.

Women were imprisoned, legally persecuted, and subjected to violence and humiliation, even “sexual” degradations specifically adjusted to their bodies and their gender.

In the following year women took more initiatives and developing their own forms of action.

It all started when, in order to implement the harshest part of the austerity programme and comply with the terms imposed on it by the “lenders”, the government targeted, in advance of anybody else, the cleaners at the Ministry of Economic Development, the Inland Revenue and the Customs offices. It placed them on “reserve lists” since last August (which means that for 8 months they would be paid only three-quarters of their salary of 550 Euros per month, and then sacked).

The government followed the same tactics as in SCOURIES.

It started with targeting first the weakest and those with the least chance of getting support, ie the cleaners, to be followed at the next step by the bulk of the employees, the 25,000 civil servants to be made redundant. And it was timed at the moment when the resistance movement was getting exhausted after the relentless austerity measures, with many activists getting demoralised, depleted and forced to try and solve their own problems individually.

The government believed that, with this group of workers, ie poor women, of “lower class”, pay levels around 500 euros per month and, as they assumed, not very intelligent (which explains the origin of the cleaners’ slogan “we are cleaners, not idiots”), they could sort them out quickly, squashing them like worms.

The target was to privatise cleaning work as a gift to the private cleaning contractors. These mafia-like contractors, known as tax-evasion champions, would then re-employ them at c200euros per month (ie 2 Euros an hour), with almost non-existent security and no employment protection rights, practically equivalent to slave labour.

These women, sacked from their jobs, sacrificed to the man-eating tendencies of the Troika, these women of 45 to 57 years of age, many mothers in single parent households, divorcees, widows, over-indebted, with children, unemployed husbands, or caring for disabled dependants, with no access to “early” pensions after 20 years, and without a chance of finding another job, decided not to give in. They decided to take control of their lives in their own hands.

And so we’ve got a handful of women who decided to change the established forms of action adopted by the traditional trade unions. Some have taken the initiative and organise themselves for themselves, with a group of cleaners at their core, who had already fought battles 10 years ago and won significant victories. They have worked hard like the proverbial ant and they have weaved a web that has acquired national dimensions.

And since these workers of the ministry of economic development had been thrown on the dole and there was no point in going on strike, they decided to build with their bodies a human wall on the street, in front of the main entrance of the ministry’s offices in Syntagma Square, the most emblematic location for the establishment.

It is not by chance that these imaginative forms of action were created by women.

Since these women were being ignored because of their gender and social class, they were marginalised within the unions and had minimal links with the traditional Left organisations, they were forced to make a lot of noise so that they could be noticed and heard.

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Instead of reactive strikes and short-lived ineffectual days of action, they chose direct collective action, based on non-violence, humour and shock tactics. Wearing crowns of thorns on their heads during Easter, nooses around their necks outside Ned Democracy's offices, with music and with dance, they are demanding the immediate reinstatement of each and everyone.

These are novel actions in Greece. They occupy the entrance of the Ministry and obstruct access, especially to the Troika officials, chasing them and surrounding them, forcing them to run and enter through the back door with their bodyguards. They are engaging in physical skirmishes with the special police units. Every day they are devising new forms of action, that are reported through the mass media and attract the attention of the wider population. In short, they are breaking through the isolation.

This way, things that are usually presented as soul-less statistics, all these numbers describing record levels of unemployment and poverty, all those abstract concepts, are acquiring a human dimension, they have a human face, become real women in flesh and blood, and, what's more, women with strong personalities and their own political volition. They have names like Litsa, Despina, Georgia, Foteini, Demetra ... And with their example, their courage, their persistence and their dogged determination to win, they are giving back hope to all the victims of the austerity regime.

But .. it is important to be aware that the forces of law and order are almost daily bullying these women to make an example of them, because their bosses are worried that the phenomenon would spread. The whole country is watching this sad spectacle of women, many of advanced age, being daily trampled upon, manhandled and injured by the police "Rambos", who could have been their sons.

And why? The simple reason is that the Troika itself wants to fight them, because they are an example, a model to be adopted by all those oppressed; because they are at the front line of the rejection of the austerity politics not just in Greece, but the whole of Europe; because their fighting spirit is infectious...

More than ever, the struggle of these 595 heroic cleaners, is also our struggle. Lets not leave them fighting on their own. They are fighting for us, let us fight for them too. Lets organise the pan-european and international solidarity.

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*English translation from Greek translation of French original, by Isidoros Diakides!!*