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Greece

The effects of the crisis on daily life

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This article, written obviously before the latest elections, give a picture of the effects of the austerity plans, against which the Greek people protested in their votes on May 6.

At first sight it might seem absurd, but for Greece's National Day on March 25, the objective of the PASOK/New Democracy government was for no demonstrations to take place, after those which had marked the day of October 28 (the 'no' to Mussolini was transformed into 'no' to the Troika')[1]. But in spite of the deployment of 7,000 police officers in the centre of Athens and of the almost empty processions – access was prohibited–, the celebration of the beginning of the War of Independence in 1821 took the form of independence from the government which takes its orders from the European bourgeoisie.

Teachers and parents confronted the police, high-school students in the procession refused to salute the authorities, and, in the provinces, town halls refused to install platforms for the "officials"!

These acts of civil disobedience are the sign that, even though the PASOK leadership of the GSEE trade-union confederation is of course doing less than nothing, resistance is being organized, in a phase where economic policy becomes harsher with each passing day. Thus, the ceiling for income tax will go down to 5,000 euros annual income, while the minimum wage is further reduced by 22 per cent, and by 32 per cent for those under 25, while pensions are being cut by between 12 and 20 per cent, while the organisation responsible for providing low-cost working-class housing is dissolved... all that while Christine Lagarde pontificates that wages are much too high in Greece. Faced with terrible daily problems, popular resistance is trying to organize in order to survive, with a decisive challenge before it: halting the rise of a racism that is giving the neo-Nazi vermin the chance to reappear, encouraged by the government and supported by the press under its orders. It is important in this context that all local struggles really take into account the need for an anticapitalist policy at a national level, breaking with the logic of today's dire poverty. Although that partly involves the coming elections (feared by the Troika, which is exerting pressure to postpone them for as long as possible), the urgency of a prolonged national mobilization, backed by international solidarity, is on the agenda.

Struggles in the health sector

Leaving aside some quite considerable achievements in the past period, such as establishing medical centres in the most remote villages, with young doctors working there for the first few years after graduating, successive governments have increasingly favoured liberal medical care, allowing in hospitals practices of paying cash directly to surgeons before they operate, practices that the Right and PASOK pretend to have only recently discovered! Patients being left on mattresses in the corridors due to lack of space is a scandal which started well before the crisis. But with the crisis, the hospital sector is more than ever neglected:

â€¢ Shortages of drugs and products for basic maintenance. Thus, the Professional Union of Orthopaedic Material has just decided not to deliver to hospitals anymore because the state has not paid them since 2010.

â€¢ Shortages of personnel, and non-payment of overtime and days on standby.

â€¢ In parallel, a very big increase in patients using the hospitals, with huge queues at health centres.

Thus, one of the biggest hospitals in Athens, Sotiria, which specializes in lung diseases, has seen over the last two years an increase in the number of patients of between 30 and 40 per cent, while the government is trying to amalgamate it with a neighbouring hospital, which will mean fewer beds and staff cuts in a hospital where already for a long time the lack of male nurses has obliged families to pay for private personnel to assist patients at night.

That is why a big mobilization has begun, whose demands are:

• not one bed to be closed;

• hiring of the necessary personnel;

• payment of standby days (which have not been paid since December) ;

• supplying of the drugs and the material necessary to care for patients.

For weeks, health workers have been organising work stoppages and occupying the offices of the management of the neighbouring hospital. For its part, the Federation of Hospital Workers has organized twenty days of action against the policy of evaluation of employees, the dismissal of staff and the many hospital amalgamations that are underway. This week there took place all over the country occupations and rallies in defence of a public health policy.

The brown plague tries to rise again

Although they had been relatively discreet since 1974, the year of the fall of the military dictatorship, the fascists had never completely disappeared, shamelessly exploiting nationalism and anti-Semitism and trying for several years now rebuild their forces on the basis of racist campaigns against the many immigrants arriving from Africa and Asia. This far Right has today a double visage:

• An institutional face with the LAOS party, a kind of equivalent of the French National Front, around its caudillo, Karatzafaris. It failed however in the gamble it took: to support the policy of Papandreou, from conviction but also so as to offer a presentable face and to enter the government of national union that it was advocating. In fact, it paid quite dearly for it, pulled out its ministers (but two of them joined New Democracy!), so it re-launched its activity, rediscovering its habitual anti-immigrant discourse.

• Neo-Nazi activists, petty thugs organized in Chryssi Avgi ("Golden Dawn"), whose leader is a former terrorist who planted bombs. Openly protected by the MAT (Greek riot police) and used when necessary as auxiliaries of the police, they have had a certain success in a district in the centre of Athens by organizing part of the population against the immigrants who live there in dire poverty. Thefts, but also some murders committed by immigrants have provided the pretext for a wave of racism, with violent attacks and the formation of "vigilance" groups, and the intolerable election to Athens City Council of the leader of the group, who had no hesitation in giving the Nazi salute in the town hall. As of now, the group, as though it had been made respectable by the participation of its LAOS counterpart in the government, is trying to move to the next stage, in suburbs of Athens and in the provinces: on the one hand attempts to infiltrate assemblies of the Indignant, on the other enrolment of young people to attack immigrants and antiracists. They even try incursions into suburbs with a democratic tradition, such as this week in Nea Smyrni, where they injured two Syrian refugees right in the main square, which was full of people who did not react.

For its part, the Network for Monitoring Racist Attacks has recorded a very sharp increase in attacks, and is worried by the participation of minors.

Faced with this situation, the government is making the conscious choice of encouraging racism and thus fascist violence, with a policy and declarations that are illustrated by the minister “for the protection of citizens”, Michalis Chrysochoydis, a very reactionary cadre of PASOK. Justifying the opening of a veritable concentration camp for immigrants fleeing their conditions of war and poverty (1,000 places in a former barracks which will be guarded by a private militia), he declared (quoted by *Epochi*): “We must face resolutely the question of immigration, which has now been transformed into a social and national problem”. And speaking about the policy of camps: “It is the only way that will enable us to neutralize this bomb (sic). Otherwise, inevitably, we will be led to catastrophe. And so we can no longer as a society stand for this. Hundreds of thousands of poor and wretched men in the streets, without work, with nothing to do and starving, victims of the criminal gangs of the slave trade: it is absolutely vital that we take steps”. Since then the government has announced the construction of 30 similar camps in the country, where 30,000 immigrants will be held. Parallel to this we have a big campaign by the government and the media about the danger that this population represents, including for public health.

The tone is set ... And so the antiracist and today antifascist tasks are extremely urgent. There are at least two such tasks:

• a central battle for the rights of immigrants, in particular for them to be welcomed in a way that is worthy of the rights of man. From this point of view, it is certainly necessary to put a stop to the policy which forces immigrants without resources to survive in terrifying and dangerous conditions in some districts of Athens. But to remove the public benches in the main squares, as the mayor of the capital has done, reinforces exclusion and justifies racism. However, the demands concern both the Greek and immigrant population: job creation, in particular in the building industry (a sector that has been very hard hit by the crisis), the right to quality health care, the right to an education (this year, there were no school books for months on end and schools were closed as economy measures) ...

• unity of the antiracist movement so as to give it the mass and effective character that is necessary. On March 17, a demonstration of 1,000 people marched (and was blocked by the police) towards Aghios Pandelimonas, the district where the neo-Nazis are active. This demonstration, called by an association linked, as is often the case in Greece, to a political organization, was an example of a fightback that was necessary but very insufficient. At a time when the neo-Nazis are credited in the opinion polls with scores sometimes higher than those of LAOS and could get into Parliament, united and prolonged mass campaigns are on the agenda, and we have seen some examples of this, with the massive participation of high-school students. Preventing the fascists from growing, and reconquering through mass mobilizations and anticapitalist perspectives the neighbourhoods that have fallen into their hands form part of our urgent tasks!

Crisis and struggles in the media

The struggles of workers in the Greek media have been many and hard since the beginning of the crisis. From the point of view of the working class, the primary reason is that the media have a regulated core (newspapers and television channels in Athens), with real collective agreements and trade-union organizations – something that is exceptional for the private sector. It is true that around this core, there is a plethora of enterprises (magazines, Internet, small radios and provincial newspapers, etc.) and very flexible workers, who were aiming up to now to obtain the “regulations” of the Athens newspapers. The logic of the crisis has reversed this movement, pushing everyone towards a levelling downwards!

Admittedly, the crisis has brutally affected the income of the media, which depends to a large extent on advertising, and therefore on the current economic conjuncture, in the context moreover of a worldwide reorganization of information because of the Internet. But this has been used rather as an opportunity for the big capital which controls information to take on the workers and dismantle the regulations. It should also be pointed out that the capital which controls the media does not do so just for the pleasure of the immediate profits that are derived from the sector, but rather to manipulate the media in favour of its other businesses: of the four big press groups in Athens, two are controlled by ship-owners and one belongs to a Greek multinational of the building industry. And even the way in which the crisis has been managed shows this violent determination on the part of multinational capital. For example, the Greek subsidiary Leo Burnett, part of the French advertising multinational Publicis, whose declaration of “bankruptcy” (read, refusal to pay its debts) last year reinforced the spread of the crisis and the pressure on the media.

In a first phase, 2010-2011, attacks especially took the form of mass dismissals, closing-down of newspapers and reorganization of work. The big groups succeeded in brutally imposing a contraction of at least a third of their workforce, making a large number of workers unemployed. And especially, in order to do this, they systematically resorted to dividing the workers (journalists against administrative staff, radio technicians against printers - the watchword was “everyone for themselves” - and attacking the trade unions as “irresponsible”. These attacks were organized most of the time by “spontaneous” movements within the workplaces to cries of “save the enterprise”. The big press group DOL – emblematic for Greece, one of the traditional pillars of political power – was in the vanguard of all these attacks, of division, of dismissals, of the fight against the unions.

The wages struggle

The attacks against wages were the epicentre of the second phase, which moreover also began very early. Thus Sky TV, which belongs to the Greek ship-owner Alafouzos, imposed in December 2010 the first individual contracts: wages cuts of 10 per cent, with the breaking of collective agreements and dismissal for those who refused a procedure that aimed – over and above the question of wages – at breaking the presence of the trade unions in the enterprises and violating the bourgeois legality of the minima laid down by the law and by collective agreements (a European fiction which at the time was still judicially in force). This movement became generalized during 2011 in all the groups and repeatedly : the radio operator Pegasos, which belongs to a multinational of the building industry, in the same way imposed three times wage cuts of 10 per cent, each time creating unheard-of violence in the enterprise. Similarly another ship-owner, Kyriakou, has just demanded a third cut in the wages (of between 10 and 20 per cent) of the workers of the Antenna channel, a week after its Serbian subsidiary had declared juicy profits! It should be pointed out that the drop in real wages (counting simply inflation and taxes on wages in the name of the crisis) over the last two years has been estimated at around 25 per cent. By adding on the reduction of nominal wages imposed in this second phase, we get a cumulated drop of 50 per cent, and it seems that the goal is to reach a reduction of wages by two-thirds.

But there is worse: because what has become generalized since last year is work that is not paid or paid with delays of several months. Very few enterprises in the sector continue to pay wages normally! The most striking and well-known cases (but the practice is general, especially in small companies) are Alter TV, which has stopped paying its 700 workers for a year and a half, and *Eleftherotypia* (one of the four big newspapers in Athens and the only one which was a little bit critical towards the policy of the Troika) which stopped paying its 800 workers last summer. In both cases, the workers, after a few months of illusions in a so-called “rescue of their enterprise” went on strike with occupation, and benefitted from solidarity from Greek society comparable to that received by the strike of the steelmakers of Halivourgia. There was even a beginning of resumption of activity under workers’ control , with two issues of *Eleftherotypia* published, but with Alter TV, after a few months of broadcasts made by the workers, the media bosses and the state cut off the broadcasting antennae.

The effects of the crisis on daily life

In the phase that is now opening up there are two important things at stake: first of all the dismantling of any public information structure (local public radios controlled by the town halls, the national news agency and public television and radio), and, especially, the dismantling of collective agreements and work regulations, because to the de facto violation of the labour legislation, the new memorandum worked out by the Troika adds the de jure suppression of collective agreements (employers are no longer obliged to respect them!), as well as the freedom of capital to pay labour as it sees fit (to lower wages it is no longer necessary for the worker to agree!).

In spite of continuous and repeated struggles on the level of workplaces and of the whole sector (with strikes and central mobilizations), workers have the feeling of going from defeat in defeat, of working in a capitalist propaganda machine, entirely directed against society and against labour. That poses more and more the need for a reorientation of the movement in order to link up with the rest of Greek workers, in the struggle of course, but especially also in seeking a method of working which takes up again the professional deontology that is ridiculed systematically by the capitalists of the media in the service of the various troikas. This is an internal and external battle, in the sector and even beyond the country, because what is at stake is not only the wages and conditions of a few tens of thousands of workers, but the reproduction of a system which has no perspective other than barbarism, in Europe and in the world.

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[1] On October 28, 1941, the Greek government refused to capitulate before the Italian invasion of the country