

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4204>



Solidarity and struggle

From Germany to Greece

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV488 - September 2015 -

Publication date: Thursday 3 September 2015

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Five German left activists on building solidarity with the Greek people and confronting the pro-austerity elites in their own country.

On May 18, Mario Draghi, president of the European Central Bank (ECB), unveiled his institution's new headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany before a group of about one hundred guests in what the Deutsche Welle [described](#) as a "low-key ceremony."

That same day, for every one guest at the grand opening, there were over one hundred people in the Frankfurt streets protesting the austerity politics the ECB helps enforce throughout Europe "most severely in Greece."

Organized by [Blockupy](#), an Occupy Wall Street-esque network of organizations that formed in Germany in 2012, the day of action included a blockade of the bank's new skyscraper, a march of over ten thousand people, and a protest in front of a shopping mall where workers were on strike. It concluded with a [pitched battle](#) between blockaders and police, who tried to clear them out with water cannons; protesters set police cars and tire barricades on fire.

The day's events and photos "depicting Europe's financial capital suffused with smoke and tear gas" called into question the narrative that Germany is Greece's opposite, that it's a country where the euro has accomplished everything promised and has won over every layer of the population.

So what is the state of the German left, especially in relation to the anti-austerity struggles across Europe today? At the end of July journalist Amien Essif spoke with five activists from the German left to explore what it means for Germans to stand in solidarity with the Greek people, the connections between anti-austerity and antiracist struggles, and how to build a movement against the "Europe of capitalism and borders."

The participants are as follows:

• Sascha Stanicic, a member of [Socialist Alternative](#), a German Trotskyist organization associated with the Committee for a Workers' International and a sister organization to the US Socialist Alternative.

• Moritz Rieder, an activist from the Interventionist Left, an "undogmatic and emancipatory" organization and the principal group behind Blockupy.

• Daniel Morteza and Max Manzey, organizers with Die Linke.SDS, Die Linke's student organization.

• Andreas Hesse, a member of a radical group of German trade unionists that organizes solidarity trips to Greece for German workers.

Jacobin

Germany, the largest economy in Europe, has translated its economic superiority into political dominance, which it has used to impose austerity on Greece. As it is portrayed in the media, the relationship between the German and Greek people is defined by economic disparity, making any display of German solidarity a

matter of pity rather than common cause. Is this the state of things?

Sascha Stanicic

The German economy has benefited from the euro, but that doesn't mean that the German people or the German working class has benefitted. The competitive advantage Germany has through the euro also exists because of a policy of austerity and [low wages](#), precarization of labor, which was pushed through in Germany before other countries.

It is true that if you look at the period since the Great Recession, the German economy has come out of that quicker and the attacks here were not on the scale as in other countries. So many people would think we're lucky, and maybe the fact that the crisis did not have so much of an effect here has something to do with the policy of the government.

At the same time, I think that consciousness of people here towards Greece is not simple. There were opinion polls that said that for a majority of Germans, the main thing they are worried about in regard to the Greek crisis is the living conditions of the Greek people themselves.

So there's a sympathy and a worry about what it means for the Greek people, but at the same time, they think that if a "Grexit" [a Greek exit from the eurozone] occurs, then this will mean the German taxpayer has to pay, and unfortunately I think this idea is also supported, consciously or subconsciously, by many on the Left.

You have the situation where many of the leaders of [Die Linke](#) would say they are against the latest austerity package, that they are in solidarity with Syriza, and so on, but they would also say that a Grexit would be the worst possible thing for the German people, because it means then that the German taxpayer has to pay. While in reality the so-called taxpayer has already paid through bailing out the banks by taking over the Greek debt into public hands.

I think this is a logic which we have to argue against because in my view, the only way forward for the Greek people is to break with the logic of austerity, to break with the logic of the euro and the EU, and to break with the basic capitalist logic.

But I think this is a problem which leads to confusion in consciousness here and which is a break with solidarity movements. In that sense, I would say there's no solidarity movement in the sense of the word. A movement would involve a broader layer of people.

If you like, Blockupy is a movement, but in a sense, it is a movement of left-wing activists. Different left-wing activists of different groups coming together, but there's no movement which would include broader layers of the working class of the youth. But I would say that there are possible starting points in the struggles which you refer to, which we've had.

Moritz Rieder

It's true that the majority of Germans are behind the politics of [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel and [German Finance Minister Wolfgang] Schäuble against Greece at the moment. But then, on the other hand, there are struggles going on here, like [strikes](#), struggles for refugees, etc. But those struggles are not happening in the frame of anti-austerity politics. We had something like preventive austerity here in the 2000s before the crisis, with cuts to

social benefits by the Social Democrats.

So, many of the struggles that are going on here are not in the frame of struggles against crisis politics, austerity, etc. And that is of course a huge problem.

On the other hand, for us in the Blockupy movement, the current struggles in Europe are not simply about solidarity with the Greek people. To us it's more than that because what's going on there is not simply Germany against Greece, but it's about a common struggle against a Europe of capital and borders.

Daniel Morteza

I would agree. I think the problem is that people in Germany, of course, know that wages are very low and didn't increase for many years, but don't have the mental connection to what's happening in Greece and the model of the German export "cheap production in Germany because of low wages" which has a lot to do with the [crisis](#) in Southern Europe.

This is something that many people don't know, and I think it's very abstract. The majority of the radical left knows about it, and I think it was a strength of Blockupy that we had all the serious parts of the radical and revolutionary left coming together and focusing on crisis and resistance against austerity politics, but I think for the normal population of workers, it's still too abstract and we have to better connect the struggles.

Max Manzey

It's hard to add to that. I just want to underline that especially in the last year there was a wave of strikes I hadn't seen in the whole time since I've been politically active "the [Post strike](#) , the strikes at the [Deutsche Bahn](#) , the [Charité clinic strike](#) in Berlin, the [strike in the kindergartens](#) . There are many fights going on that are really important, and I totally agree that they are too little connected "with Blockupy, for example, it's like a symbolic movement against austerity measures. Blockupy hasn't been able to really be a point for workers to look toward.

But Blockupy mobilized three years in a row about twenty to thirty thousand people, especially young people. And that's not just the radical left, but it's a little bit more. It's not a movement "like a big spontaneous thing" but it's more than just a one-day demonstration. It has influence on discourse in Germany.

Andreas Hesse

The majority of workers have been relatively silenced by the ruling class and the federal government. They hope they will be spared the fate of their Greek counterparts. So solidarity is not very pronounced.

Lately, it has increased a bit. For example, the chairman of the [DGB trade unions](#) was forced to issue a statement that the election of Syriza was not a threat but an opportunity for Europe. But this was merely a declaration, which wasn't followed by any action by the unions, because the German trade unions work together with the companies and the federal government to defend German jobs against international competition.

But the climate in the unions has become more open in the last year to internal discussion, especially after the election of Syriza.

In the past five years, the mass movements against austerity have occurred in places where the effects of capitalism were perhaps the most grave: in Spain, in Greece. There was Occupy Wall Street in the US, but it never attained the kind of momentum that brought Syriza to power. What strategies do you use to build a movement in a place where the image is that everything is okay?

Rieder

First of all, we started Blockupy as a transnational movement against the European negotiation of the crisis. And then we said okay, let's go to Frankfurt, let's go to where the European Central Bank is and have protests in the center of austerity politics and invite comrades from all over Europe and try to block Frankfurt for one day.

So to have sort of a metropolitan strike, block the ECB, to stop them from working for one day and then afterwards also going out in front of shopping malls. For example, we protested in front of Karstadt because the workers there were striking.

The idea was to have one day that just sort of interrupted the normal process of capitalist Frankfurt. This of course was mostly symbolic, but it's more than a demonstration with many people. It was an attempt to start a German movement against the crisis, but to make it European from the beginning.

So there has been international participation?

Yes, this year we had maybe two thousand people from other countries "Euros" especially from Italy, but also Slovenia, Denmark, Greece, Spain. There's the problem of traveling that far, but international groups have been involved in the coordination of the movement. So it's not just inviting them to come to the protest, but to organize it together. For example, most likely in October we will move to Brussels together as Blockupy.

Stanicic

I think it's no accident that when we talk about solidarity with Greece we talk about Blockupy, because Blockupy has been the only bigger mobilization that has occurred over the last few years. Blockupy, in my view, has achieved something important because it has made clear that there is resistance in the belly of the beast.

At the same time, I think that the way Blockupy works, it has a certain limit to reach out to those layers of working-class people who have moved into struggle on their own day-to-day issues. It is based on a certain idea of forms of resistance "Euros" blockades "Euros" rather than actual program and content.

The situation of union activists is that German trade unions have stood nominally in support of the Greek working class, but when it comes to using their political power, they haven't diverged much from the status quo. Can you explain, Mr Hesse, how you helped organize a more radical response within Germany's unions including IG Metall and ver.di, and how that has been received by union leadership?

Hesse

Three and a half years ago, we began to organize as colleagues from various unions in different cities who had developed our own perspective, and we decided to go down to Greece in solidarity, organize events, have discussions, get a picture of things. And we've invited Greek colleagues to Germany in order to give those affected

by the crisis a way to contradict the ruling-class propaganda. The effect is always greater when the person concerned can express the situation himself than if we would just try to make political statements.

I can give one example where we've had a good response from unions, but it has been an absolute exception. The IG Metall in Salzgitter has for years made the struggles in Greece a topic of their union training program. We've gotten support from them for our trips, and they've been involved when we've had visitors from Greece. But this is not typical of German unions.

Manzey

The main problem is that the unions in Germany are totally dominated by the [Social Democratic Party](#) (SPD), and the SPD, of course, has [bad positions](#) on austerity politics. So the question is: how is it possible to make a counter-hegemonic program inside of the unions?

I think it's a great example "Euros" traveling to Greece. But I think it's also a question how, for example, Die Linke as a party can get more influence inside of the unions to somehow question the dominance of the SPD. I think that is a big question, and there is a lot of work to do for the Left. Not just the party, but the radical left, some of whom are also connected to the unions.

There have been a few good steps "Euros" for example, the conferences of the [Rosa Luxemburg Foundation](#), which were able to get some parts of the left wings of the unions together and organize. I think Greece was not a big topic there, but that is something where this kind of connection can grow.

A minority of Die Linke's parliamentary members [voted against](#) the second so-called bailout package in February, but Die Linke.SDS took a more firm position against the austerity measures that it imposed. Is there tension between the leadership in Die Linke and the student activists?

Morteza

Yeah, I think there is something like that. SDS considers itself as part of the left wing of the party Die Linke. I think the right wing of Die Linke interpreted solidarity with Greece as unconditional solidarity with whatever the Syriza government does and did.

This we criticized as Die Linke.SDS. We said, of course we show solidarity with the left movement in Greece trying to fight austerity and to gather all critical parts of the population against austerity. But this is, of course, not an unconditional solidarity with the government in Greece, no matter which color it has, if it calls itself left-wing, anti-austerity or not.

Stanicic

I think this is a very important point for the future of any solidarity movements with the Greek working class. Now, with the [capitulation](#) of [former Greek Prime Minister Alexis] Tsipras and the Syriza government, I think it is important that we define our solidarity on the basis of politics and not on the basis of organizations.

The groups I am working with in Die Linke, we put forward a resolution to the last party congress saying we have to support a left government also when it breaks with the euro, because we think it is necessary to move on to socialist

measures like the democratic nationalization of banks and enterprises, capital controls, a state monopoly of foreign trade, and democratic economic planning, and so on " and this makes it necessary to break with the euro given the present conditions. But this is not a position with which you will get a majority at this stage in Die Linke.

Manzey

I think the appearance of Syriza is very important for the [German left](#) , for the reformist left as well as the radical left, because for the reformist left " I think Sascha is totally right " the leadership of Die Linke for the most part sees the EU as a peace project, and they see the chance to reform the EU in favor of a social EU.

But now we're at the point where we can see that this is a project that won't work, and that the EU is a neoliberal militaristic project that is not reformable even as there is a left-wing government in Greece. It's a big problem, and we have to discuss this inside of Die Linke and also inside of the radical left.

The other thing is Syriza became big in such a short time. It was not a revolutionary party that became really big in a short time from a small core to a really big mass party, but it was a [broader left project](#) in Greece, ranging from the reformist left to revolutionaries who were working in one party. So, somewhat similar to Die Linke in Germany, which grew in a short time with all the problems that have already been described.

But anyway, I think the left wing of Syriza will now be in the core of a new formation of the left, and it was a really big step for the whole left in Greece to have Syriza. So I think that it's important for the German left to look at it and learn from it.

Rieder

To me, as a radical leftist, the major point of reference within Greece is of course the social movements " the people on the streets fighting [austerity](#) . And it's also no surprise that you can't simply vote out austerity in that [relation of power](#) in Europe at the moment.

But on the other hand, Syriza has been interesting for us, of course, especially because the blackmailing [of Greece by its creditors] in the last months has shown how much of a farce European democracy is and how brutal the austerity is at the moment, and any alternative to it " even the attempt to think about alternatives " is brutally crushed.

I think that process has created some cracks in the hegemony of the Schäuble-Merkel regime, and that it's our task as radical leftists in Germany and all over Europe to deepen those cracks and see if we can open some splits.

In Germany and in France the far right has come to prominence in a way that hasn't been seen for a long time. In this context, the neoliberal politics of the European Union have been put forward as the humanitarian alternative to the far right. This has made the struggle against neo-Nazism in Germany a priority for many activists, and some German activists I've talked to have said that it is a struggle which has exhausted the Left here and drained resources.

Do you believe that the development of groups like [Pegida](#) (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) has distracted the Left from the struggle against austerity?

Rieder

First of all, I think the fight against neo-Nazism is an absolute necessity here. I think the rise of nationalism, racism, and sexism in the last few years in Germany and in Europe is closely connected to the crisis. So to me it doesn't make much sense to pit those struggles against each other. Our task is to show, for example, how German nationalism and the politics against Greece are connected. Inherently connected.

Manzey

We had a pretty big movement at the beginning of the year against Pegida. There were one day more than one hundred thousand [protesters](#) against the Pegida movement on the street, all across Germany. And for a few months there were weekly demonstrations against Pegida.

And of course there were lots of left groups, including Die Linke, that mobilized for this, and there was also a question of resources. But I think that's not how movements work. If you have one hundred thousand people on the street at an antiracist demonstration and you have strikes and so on, then there's a field for left activists to argue with people, to mobilize for solidarity movements and actions for Greece. At the university where I'm active "Euros" Humboldt University "Euros" we built up a committee of students against Pegida, and we mobilized some of the students we met there to the Blockupy movement.

Morteza

I think it's dangerous if the left parties in Europe or in Germany lose their anti-establishment attitude and fail to formulate a critique against the European system as it is now. If all the left parties in Europe fail to do so, I can understand how the right parties get stronger.

I think it's not automatic that if the Left fails then the Right gets stronger. This would be too simple. But in Eastern German states where Die Linke has totally lost its attitude against the establishment, you see that the right parties get stronger. Why? Because the left parties have no alternative. If the Left in the whole of Europe fails to be an anti-EU force, then I think it has failed on one of the big questions of our time.

Stanicic

It's also a question of how the Left acts within these antiracist and antifascist movements. It's a big problem that many on the Left would forget about all the political differences with the Social Democrats, even the conservatives, when fighting against racism. Suddenly it's as if we have something to defend together.

I think that is a big mistake. Because if we say that the basis for the growth of the far right is the lack of an alternative to the established pro-capitalist parties, if then, in the fight against the far right the Left presents itself as being in one common front with those who have to be fought, then the danger is there to push people in the direction of the far right.

So I think it is important to intervene politically in the antiracist movements by not restricting yourself to a moralistic antifascism or antiracism, but by actually also challenging the bourgeois parties, challenging social democracy, and explaining the link between the different issues.

Hesse

It's my belief that German politics in Europe is fostering the growth of right-wing politics in many different countries.

The [growth of the] [National Front](#) in France is a result of anti-European sentiment in the working class which has been caused by the hegemony of German capital in Europe. Here in Germany, things are also moving to the right rather than the left, as they did in Greece.

You've got to name capitalism as the cause behind the rise of fascism. We can't fight this as a moral problem, but only in relation to capitalism, its interests, the emergence and growth of fascist, nationalist, and reactionary forces "àEuros" that must be explained. If we don't see the whole picture, if the struggle remains only on the moral level, then the protests will come to nothing.

Is there a consensus among those on the Left in Germany about what needs to be done in the Greek crisis?

[Everyone laughs]

Morteza

Transitional program . . .

Manzey

I think even in Die Linke there are many different positions on what has to be done in Greece. The main question is how to stop austerity, and I think we saw how it doesn't work: going into government and undergoing a long process in the European institutions to decide austerity measures. Obviously that doesn't work, and our focus should be on the movement from below and the organizations that are part of the resistance in Greece.

The second point is the question of power. Not just the left's power in parliament, but the power in society as a whole "àEuros" about production and everything. If you want to build up an economy that is totally crushed, inside or outside of the EU, you need to control the production to grow. That is not possible under the austerity influence of the EU. I think that's also why a revolutionary perspective within Greece is completely necessary.

There are some examples where factories are under workers' control and hospitals and so on, but they are few. That is something the Left in Greece should build on, and we in Germany should look at it and build a solidarity movement and solidarity with the resistance in Greece, no matter if there is a left government or not.

Stanicic

I think there's no consensus. There's no consensus amongst the Left in Greece, and even amongst the left wing of the Left, there's no consensus. If you look at some of the spokespersons of Syriza's left, as well as some of the spokespersons of the Left in Die Linke, they have only gone so far as to say we should stop paying the debt, maybe we should nationalize the banks. But they would not explain that within the framework of a capitalist mode of production, a Grexit is no solution.

Hesse

I agree that the question of a Grexit is not the deciding question. When you break with the [European] institutions, you only have a real opportunity if you begin to break with capitalist property relations. But I think that's where the difficulty begins.

I cannot imagine an isolated socialist Greece. Greece is so weak that in the long term it wouldn't be able to withstand outside pressure. That is not a question of the Greek working class, but of the European working class, if you think about it. Even if Greece can perhaps be a pioneer in this direction, it will be crucial if other countries follow or not.

Rieder

In the Interventionist Left we have always claimed that capitalism is crisis, which means that the fight against austerity has to be an anticapitalist fight, of course. There's no social-democratic option.

But then within Blockupy there's little consensus about the way out of the crisis, since our network includes a wide variety of groups and parties. But I don't think that at the moment such a consensus is absolutely necessary in order to act together. One nice umbrella slogan has been, "They want capitalism without democracy, we want democracy without capitalism." So that has been an umbrella slogan to unite us.

What my difference is with some socialist or Trotskyist organizations is that I don't think that we need to have a clear plan right now on, say, the five points of revolutionary strategy, because we are simply too weak for that.

So my approach would be to intervene into struggles, to try to radicalize struggles, to build up a movement and not focus so much on all those grammatical discussions. They are, of course, important, and there's the question of strategy, but I think there's a tendency within the German left to discuss words and programs way too much instead of intervening into struggles and trying to develop a new language as well.

I think there's a tendency within the German left to comment a lot on every move of Syriza, and I find that problematic because our task is quite clear: we're in Berlin, that's the center of capitalist Europe, that's the center of the blackmailing of Greece, so we need to start the fight here. That's not a question of solidarity with some wing of Syriza or not, but a question of our futures as well.

So that's also one reason why I find the framework of "solidarity" with Greece to be sort of misleading sometimes. It's rather a struggle against a certain vision of Europe and against a machinery of power, and that's a common struggle, be it here or in Greece. I think we should concentrate on developing the struggle here and not so much on commenting on every decision of Syriza.

Stanicic

We have a consensus on one thing: that the main task of the left is to fight here. But I would say that the fight should focus on the day-to-day struggles. And not only by organizing movements of those who are convinced already "the radical left" but by doing the things like the strike movements in the Charité hospital, where we have been involved a lot, and in the kindergarten strikes "building left opposition in the unions here to develop a perspective.

But as we were discussing Greece I think there is also a need to discuss strategies and program for Greece.

Manzey

It's also important to fight within the housing sector. We have here in Berlin a referendum going on about [social housing](#) that's also connected to the crisis and speculations on the housing market.

Still, I think it's right to also organize explicit solidarity actions. It's not just the fights for social things or solidarity. I think both are important, and I think after the Greek referendum, there were spontaneous mobilizations in many cities.

And not just these planned Blockupy demonstrations, but on July 15 in Berlin, for example, there was [a demonstration](#) with over one thousand people "against the Eurozone" and that was really spontaneous! Of course it was organized [by Blockupy], but not with four months of planning. That's not bad for this cause, and it's something that should continue.

Morteza

I think it's totally right to focus on the struggles here. Nobody would doubt that. But what bothers me is if we use this as a justification to end debates about Greece and to end debates about the limits of reformism and things like that.

I think if we are honest in our work "against the Eurozone" and we have to be honest "against the Eurozone" then we have to talk about the mistakes that were made. I mean I have nothing against German or French or Swedish comrades criticizing me, so they shouldn't be angry if we criticize them. I think this should be a consensus amongst international leftists in all of Europe. We have to discuss revolutionary strategy in all of Europe.

Within the left movement, we have the unique opportunity now to discuss the character of the European Union, to discuss the limits of reformism inside the eurozone or under the conditions of the treaties of Lisbon and Maastricht and all the things like that. And it would be totally fatal for the left in Germany not to participate and show concrete examples in Southern Europe now that the fight against austerity is always a fight for socialism.

[Jacobin](#)