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Greece

# Social explosion, a question of months?

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV445 - February 2012 -

Publication date: Saturday 4 February 2012

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**“Kali phtochia chronia!” (“happy new year of poverty!”) instead of “Kali proto chronia!” (“happy new year!”): that was the ironic wish that the workers on the big daily newspaper “Eleftherotypia”, unpaid since the summer and on a rolling strike for a week, published during a message requesting support for their struggle. This humour is today indispensable, partly not to fall into despair before the situation of poverty which grows daily, and partly to maintain the flame of resistance, which in appearance has not weakened for a year and a half, but which obviously flickers from seeing a considerable, but disunited force held back by the union of the bourgeoisie and its international bodies.**

Parallels between ancient Greece and current Greece are not lacking in recent times, and the “Greek tragedy” has been served up in all journalistic sauces. In the country which invented democracy to put an end to debt slavery, the European bourgeoisie imposes its reactionary approach: even if the institution of slavery is not (yet) re-established, the poverty into which the Greek people have been plunged at a growing speed greatly resembles a modern slavery. In the new situation where the government of the technocrat Loukas Papadimos has no legitimacy originating from the parliamentary elections of 2009, it is clear that the popular response, to be effective, should link economic programme and reappropriation and extension of democratic processes.

Every day, 2,400 new workers are thrown into unemployment, which has officially reached 17.7% (12.4% a year ago), with 21.5 % of women affected and 35.3% of youth. 50% of the unemployed have been out of work for more than one year. 30,000 civil servants were awaiting dismissal on December 31, and the haemorrhage will continue in 2012 with the aim of dismissing 150,000 civil servants by 2015 (in a country with just over 11 million inhabitants), education and the army being alone officially “preserved”. Second tier pensions above 150 Euros should fall by 30% minimum and the wages in the public sector should continue to fall (an employee of the Agricultural Development Ministry with a seniority of between 5 and 7 years should see their wage cut from 1 600 to 1 225 Euros). All taxes have been increased (budget 2012).

Paul Tomsen “the best known personality of the troika (IMF, EU and ECB), today de facto in charge of the country’s affairs” says on the one hand that the imposition over the last six months of the fiscal burden on a part of the population which can no longer pay is an error, and on the other demands two measures: the suspension of collective agreements (to impose flexibility and the alignment of wages with productivity) and the closure of a certain number of public enterprises (which in his view have ceased to fulfil the function for which they were created). Obviously, no question of asking the people for a democratic opinion on the utility of these enterprises!

In the centre of Athens, the official figure for homelessness is 20,000. All the social indices are catastrophic and get worse at dizzying speed. For example, the suicide rate, traditionally quite low in Greece, around 2.8 per 100,000 inhabitants, more than doubled in 2011, climbing to 6! Six people out of 10 reduced their overall food intake in 2011, whereas 1 in 11 has been fed by the soup kitchens distributed by various networks (town halls, churches, NGOs and so on). According to Médecins du Monde, if the urgency of the “humanitarian crisis” was until now in Uganda, now it is in Greece. Not to forget the explosion of AIDS, above all among drug addicts: in one year a terrifying increase (around 1,500 % or a 16 fold increase), because of the destruction of all services of shelter and treatment for marginalised youth.

Thus the urgency of a democratic reappropriation of its choices by the Greek people depends of course to the state of the left forces and their proposals, which we deal with below. But it also depends on the recent developments and choices made by the parties who have formed a “national unity” government. It amounts in fact to one of the last cards of the Greek bourgeoisie facing a still growing rise of popular resistance. This is the reason for the haste with which the Socialist prime minister, Giorgos Papandreou, called in late October for the organisation of a referendum,

taking (nearly) all his European partners by surprise. In fact, this question of a referendum on the measures to deal with the debt has come up at three times since the establishment of the austerity measures.

In Spring 2010, it was the radical left Syriza which during the first workers' mobilisations (halted after the death of three bank employees during a fire due to Molotov cocktails launched by mysterious hooded figures, never identified), campaigned for a referendum for or against the measures. The response given then by the anti-capitalist left was that the referendum was taking place in the street and the objective was a rolling general strike.

This point then re-emerged in the spring of this year, when Papandreou did not miss an opportunity to publicly declare his wish for a referendum... once a maximum of austerity measures had been taken! Not one left or right force followed him on this terrain, and the workers' movement continued its mobilisations, forcing its national union leaderships, dominated by PASOK, to organise general strikes: in the Athens demonstration of October 19, involving at least 300,000 workers and youths, the feeling emerged, all the more admirable after a year of unprecedented attacks against living standards, that basically power was in the street and that it was possible and in any event necessary to go further than this immense demonstration. Even if the day after the mobilisations were less massive, this popular force inspires fear in high places, with dissent apparent among the cadres of PASOK, in particular at the trade union level (the resignation of the leader of the Public Federation ADEDY was understood as a rejection of the policies of his party).

In this context, the announcement of a referendum on the policy of the government, the day after the demonstrations of October 28, had a dual effect: surprise at the haste of the prime minister, but also indifference before a reheated dish. Even Syriza did not applaud and continued to request, like the KKE (Communist Party), the holding of immediate parliamentary elections.

Even if the referendum was abandoned on the "diktat of Sarkozy", this question merits some comments. First, the anger of Sarkozy is to be compared with the moderate reaction of Germany: according to some sources, Papandreou discussed this "coup" with the German finance minister, the final objective being to force the leader of the Greek right, Antonis Samaras, to accept the formation of a national government and to abandon his demagogic posture of condemnation of austerity measures to better win the elections tomorrow!

A question little posed on the Greek left: even in this context, would it be necessary to take up the challenge and demand the referendum? To pose the question is to answer it: the KKE like Syriza wants parliamentary elections above all and the anti-capitalist left has no desire to lose time in discussions on Papandreou's manoeuvre. We are not in the French situation of 2005, where a unitary framework for the left "no2 was possible. Such a framework is not unhappily in the traditions of the Greek left and to build on this opportunity would have taken a lot of time, whereas the referendum would have taken place in mid December.

What is more, the question imposed would not have been as simple as "for or against the austerity measures?" but would have concerned staying in the Euro zone and thus in the EU and one can count on the climate of fear that the Greek bourgeoisie would create through its parties, media and perhaps its provocations. The reappropriation of a democratic process does not then pass by the political coup of the referendum, but rests on a more favourable terrain, that of the resistance struggles.

## **An extremist government, deprived of credibility**

The "referendum" episode concluded then on what was sought by Papandreou, the EU and the IMF for several

months: a national unity government. Let us be clear – while the propaganda presents it as a measure of good sense, stressing the technocratic character of the prime minister, it should be designated for what it is – a dangerous extremist government. First because it is made up of dangerous fanatics of the “only road possible”, that of the markets, that the government has the prime if not the only task of “reassuring”. What of the interests of the people? Not a word during the formation of this government of so called national unity! Its leader, Papadimos, has been quite correctly presented as a key element of the policy of massaging of the Greek accounts to enter into the euro. This fanaticism would be all the stronger in that the government has no popular legitimacy: the majority vote in autumn 2009, was for a PASOK government whose (minimum!) programme included social measures.

We now have in Greece the full political dictatorship of the markets. The introduction in this government, 37 years after the fall of the military dictatorship, of adorers of that junta, incarnated in the ministers and secretaries of state (three in total) of LAOS is repugnant. LAOS could be compared to the French Front national, its leader Karatzaféris trying like Marine Le Pen to play the card of respectability, then of credibility as final card for the bourgeoisie. The extremism of this government has already been shown in the draft budget. E. Venizelos, the PASOK minister of the economy, boasts that there are no new austerity measures, but the draft budget in fact envisages 3.6 billion Euros of various supplementary taxes.

The viability of this government poses a basic question: what form of regime comes after it, knowing that the bourgeoisie has exhausted nearly all its traditional forces of power. Papadimos responds saying that there are no limits of time to his government, and says the future elections will not be held before April, which leaves time to get the murderous measures passed.

The leader of New Democracy (ND), Antonis Samaras, demanded elections on February 19 and explained without fear of ridicule that in any case this is not a national unity government (its party has six ministers and secretaries of state!). There is a crisis in the ranks of the ND, between the declared centrists and the populist line. Implosion is possible (a former “centrist” minister has been excluded). As for LAOS, to play the card of the “higher interest of the country” as its caudillo has done and thus participate directly in the austerity measures could deprive this party of the popular base it has won in the previous elections. That is verified already in an anonymous appeal from the cadres and activists of this party that it leave this government, which has already obliged the caudillo to insinuate that if the government is no longer effective, it will withdraw its ministers. The risk in case of visible disaffection for LAOS is that the recourse to the far right passes by the openly neo Nazi movements like the Golden Dawn (Chryssi Avgi), who have made a breakthrough in the Athens municipal elections.

As to PASOK, its survival could be at stake. It can be seen on several fronts: disputes in the leadership between Papandreou and his “internal troika”, growing disillusionment among cadres and base. In the future elections the polls give PASOK only 15-20 %. The main thing is the condemnation by the PASOK rank and file of the anti-social policy of their party, accentuated by a manifest anger at the entry of the far right into the government (which was only rejected by two deputies out of 153!). A question which is now important is that of the perspectives to offer to these thousand of former supports and hundreds of activists and cadres of PASOK. In the end it will be the ability to develop victorious struggles which will be determinant in the coming months.

## **A workers' resistance to support at the European level**

The workers' resistance as reflected in the national strike days called by the union leaderships linked to PASOK constitute an astonishing, not to say admirable, phenomenon. An example was the immense demonstration of October 19, which swept aside sectarianism (isolation of the KKE) and gave the massive feeling that it was possible to go further. The contradiction is all the more flagrant. On the one hand, this radicalism, and on the other the feeling that the

international bourgeois coalition is stronger, and the integration of a feeling of defeat, more evident undoubtedly in the local struggles. That highlights the importance of a European strike day called by the European unions, which could have a stimulating effect on the mobilisations in Greece.

The mobilisations by sector or enterprise are numerous and sometimes allow partial victories over the employer or the state. Numerous strikes have taken place in transport, a strike has broken out against the neoliberal university reform, and the taxis are on strike against the “opening” (to the big companies) of the profession and so on. One of the most significant struggles currently concerns the audiovisual and press sector (press, television, radio, magazines, and internet). It is a model on the one hand by the cruelty of the employers attack and on the other by the dynamic of resistance. Massive layoffs, brutal pay cuts have affected every company in the sector. Tens of thousands of workers are no longer paid or in any case not paid on time with most companies paying wages months late. The television channel “Alter” has not paid its 700 employees for a year, and the big Athens newspaper “Eleftherotypia” stopped paying its 840 employees this summer. This “fashion” of not paying wages extends across all sectors.

However, there is resistance to this daily violence in the workplaces. After months of working for free, the workers at “Alter” decided to occupy the head office of the television and turn it into a centre of solidarity (collecting food to organise their own survival) and being to broadcast programmes (rudimentary for the moment) which have become a centre of popularisation of the struggle of several sectors and factors. Similar projects are now being discussed by the workers at “Eleftherotypia”.

The most emblematic struggle currently is at the steel factory of Halivourgia in Aspropyrgos, in the Athenian suburbs, against redundancies and wage cuts. This struggle is led by workers linked to the pro-KKE union current PAME and is characterised not only by its combativity, but also by the very broad support it has from the near and distant population, demonstrations, broad union and political support. For example, the intervention of our comrade Yannis Felekis, historic leader of the Greek section of the Fourth International, OKDE-Spartakos, was warmly received by the strikers!

## On the left: internationalist solutions

Obviously the developments inside a mass party like PASOK should be observed by the left. The latter should be able to offer them a framework, but without concession. It isn't about offering former bureaucrats a chance to “redden” a little and reforge their careers, but to open as much as possible perspectives which can only be 100% left, taking account of the urgency resulting from the political impasses of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, from this viewpoint, the Greek left (to the left of PASOK), marked by its profound history, is lagging in relation to the blows borne by the workers, and in its responses in terms of alternative power. Whereas the intense mobilisations of all these months should have led to a permanent coordination of the sectors in struggle and on the road of self organisation, the rank and file unions, linked to the radical and anti-capitalist left, are still not in a position to offer an immediate extension to the general strikes of 24 or 48 hours. It is not enough to demand the rolling general strike for it to be credible. This goes back of course to the division on the ground, with the trade union structure of the KKE (PAME). But in the last instance that relates to the reformist character of the KKE and Synaspismos, the central party of the radical coalition Syriza.

As for the KKE, the mystery remains: how has this party, which was drained of its youth in the 1990s, and adopted a caricatured and openly Stalinist “Marxist” discourse, continued to organise combative workers and radicalised youth? In fact, more than a theoretical response, the true objective is to know how to offer unitary perspectives of struggle to these activists. Indeed it is not always thus in the daily practices of the radical or anti-capitalist left: the extra-parliamentary left has fallen into the trap of the KKE leadership in ignoring this party. Indeed, this is a crucial

issue, not only in terms of activist forces but still more in terms of political perspectives. It is flagrant that on these two terrains, the KKE leadership has no working class response to the situation. Its trade union positioning, despite the leftist accents, reflects a sentiment of defeat, which excludes any great working class battle. Hence the importance of centralisation of the struggles and the perspective of a workers' Europe, faced with a slogan of exit from the EU which represents a nationalist reflex to the Stalinist history of this party, valuing a "good" national bourgeoisie against the monopolies! At the political level, the sole slogan advanced by the KKE is that of popular power... around the KKE. Which amounts to having as sole perspective its own electoral strengthening! Faced with this impasse common struggles at the base and the advancing of unitary slogans for victory are the sole instrument which would allow advance.

As for Syriza, the regroupment of Synaspismos with the forces of the revolutionary left, the internal relation of forces remains unchanged. To speak of Syriza is above all to speak of the reformist party Synaspismos and its leader, Alexis Tsipras. The main force to its left, the KOE, has been absent in Syriza, even if it remains officially a member. The efforts of different currents or independent members "like the veteran anti-Nazi Manolis Glezos" do not change the situations. The debates inside Synaspismos dominate the orientation of Syriza. Advancing the idea of a left government, Syriza certainly provides a perspective for disoriented PASOK voters and the polls give around 30% for forces to the left of PASOK. But this political response is hardly credible today faced with the sectarianism of the KKE but also faced with divergences "Synaspismos is favourable to the renegotiation of a part of the debt. It is both too vague (what left forces?) and too precise (Synaspismos retains the perspective of a government of the parliamentary left!) to respond to current needs. At the rank and file level Syriza activists are involved in numerous resistance struggles and this common work allows discussions between all the forces of the anti-capitalist left.

Nonetheless things advance at the rhythms of the crisis and struggles and social mobilisations. For example convergences have begun on the revolutionary left, first through the process of construction of the Anti-capitalist left, Antarsya. Its congress attracted 900 delegates, representing 3,000 members. It examined notably a new question for most of the revolutionary left forces: that of real unitary fronts of struggle, which might seem obvious but is not always so in Greece! Rapprochements could thus take place with the revolutionary forces inside Syriza, thanks to a common work on the ground as in the committees against the closure of the electricity meters of those who can't pay their bills.

In the daily struggles links are made and political cleavages are approached from an open angle, to the point that strategic questions are now posed in a new fashion. For example, the idea of "poor Greece attacked by international capital and various imperialisms" has gained in credibility, to the point that cleavages on the left take place inside the current around Synaspismos, traditionally tempted by the idea that the EU was "progressive" in itself! But at the same time, the fact that the crisis in Greece is only the vanguard of a crisis and a brutal capitalist policy which extends from one country to another, shows that the overall response can only come by attacking the social roots, namely capitalism, which has no frontiers. In terms of demands the possible implosion of the EU or the euro zone imply new discussions on "exit from the euro" as transitional demands or necessary implication of a situation where a single country, like Greece, tries to free itself from the yoke of capitalist finance. That requires the stressing of the necessary self-organisation of struggles, and the coordination of these struggles not only at the national level, but at the same time at the international level, with a political dynamic which can only be that which overthrows the logic of war and the poverty of capitalism.