

Syriza continues cash for cuts policy

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On February 28, representatives from the European Union, European Central bank and International Monetary Fund arrived in Athens to discuss terms for a fourth bailout package for the Greek government. These negotiations had initially stalled, with the IMF dubious about Greece's ability to achieve a "sustainable" fiscal surplus, given that the austerity mandated by previous bailout agreements has locked the economy into a vicious debt spiral. After the inevitable period of political posturing amongst the various creditors, normal service was resumed with only the finer points of further futile austerity to be arranged.

Another bailout means another round of austerity. Yet life in Greece has already taken a rapid and brutal decline in the past eight years, a direct consequence of the savage terms imposed by the lenders, whose sole motivation is to recover the French and German banks' loans, irrespective of the human cost or economic sense. The economy has shrunk by more than a quarter. 23 percent of the population are, "severely materially deprived". The entire medical system is crumbling, with hospitals dubbed "danger zones" for patients undergoing relatively straightforward treatment. Half of pensioners are receiving a pension that puts them below the country's poverty line, in some cases receiving just €300 per month. Pensions are increasingly the only source of income to help support extended families as unemployment sits at 23 percent, with youth unemployment double that. In some regions, long-term unemployment, those out of work for more than a year, is at 77 percent. Hopelessness has sunk in.

Presiding over this social catastrophe is the left-wing party's Syriza, elected in 2015 on an explicitly anti-austerity platform, one prepared to confront the EU. The election slogan, "hope is on its way" is now little more than a bitter memory or the butt of ironic jokes. Confronted with the need for a third bailout within months of taking power, Syriza led the population to think it was preparing for a bold confrontation with the Troika and, in particular, with the EU. Yet, despite a powerful rejection of austerity in the "Oxi" referendum, the population was simply ignored as the Syriza government capitulated, implementing virtually all the EU's diktats and agreeing to give the Troika's bean counters a veto over the government's spending plans.

Syriza is also complicit in the racist treatment of refugees in the country. In line with an agreement between Turkey and the EU, Greece is overseeing the containment of 60,000 refugees, who are forced into camps, barred from leaving and given little or no access to any support or information, leaving the camps vulnerable to attacks from the far right. Stripped of dignity and basic rights, the refugee population faces deplorable conditions, with nothing being done.

Fighting back

Despite the huge levels of unemployment and insecurity, outbursts of resistance ensure the Syriza-EU axis doesn't have it all its own way. Strikes from several sectors have taken place over wages, taxation and contracts; firefighters, sailors and public sector workers to name just some. Given the precipitous drop in living standards, it is no surprise that Greece's middle classes are in revolt; the "Against the Auctions"

campaign involves members of the public walking from courtroom to courtroom trying to disrupt the sale of primary-residence property seized from those who default on loans. Farmers have been staging road blockades and lawyers indefinite strikes. This demonstrates the depth of the social crisis. Nevertheless, despite the huge opposition, the resistance remains politically impotent, fixated on the question of EU membership. Popular Unity, a split from Syriza that emerged from the referendum crisis in 2015, and the Communist Party, KKE, argue for an exit from the Eurozone, yet there is little clarity on how this would work and in any case the labour movement has not been able to unite around a clear political leadership.

Though sporadic resistance continues, it is not necessarily on the increase; for many, the difficulties in trying to survive and navigate in current conditions leads to the predominance of individual struggles to get by in such a crisis. With Syriza fatally discredited and with the Popular Unity reduced to an ineffective rump, socialists must look to establishing new structures to organise resistance and overcome the sectarian divides that weaken and undermine the labour movement. Committees of action located in big workplaces and neighbourhoods can take a lead in this struggle, helping to work out a common programme to address the immediate needs of the population, such as on the questions of housing provision, support to refugees and guarantee access to education and health care, wider provision of healthcare and the support of workers' rights.

Before negotiations could begin, the Troika extracted an agreement from Syriza to cut pensions again, breaking its promise to pensioners that a new bailout would not come at their expense. This is not a negotiation, it is extortion. The only way out for the Greek people is to stop the Troika looting their country, by seizing control of the banks and privatised infrastructure and placing them under democratic control. This would provoke a furious reaction from the European leaders, and indeed the rest of the world, but it would also send a message to the working class of Europe that the time for new, radical measures has arrived. Faced with the choice of siding with the exploited and abused people of Greece or with the privileged elites of Paris or Berlin, European workers would certainly rally to the Greeks' cause, if a lead were given.

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