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The Battle for the Heart and Soul of Greece

Shawn Hattingh

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For the last year and a half Greece has been a cauldron of class war. In December 2008 the site of anarchists battling police in the streets, in a bid to stop banks being bailed out and public education spending being slashed, occurred right across the country. In that month, general assemblies of workers, immigrants, students and the poor were also established to coordinate resistance and plan protest actions. Students across Greece also occupied their schools and universities transforming them into centres of radicalism¹. Despite the clashes on the streets, however, the revolt did not successfully spread to workplaces. This was partially because the officials of the biggest unions were hostile towards the protestors. On various occasions they called on their members to leave the streets and return to work and condemned those involved in the actions².

¹ Knoll, S. A Hot winter in Greece. www.anarkismo.net/article/12653 8th April 2009

² www.libcom.org/news/tptg-%E2%80%9Cthere%E2%80%99s-only-one-thing-left-settle-our-accounts-capital-its-state%E2%80%99%E2%80%99-16032010?quicktabs_1=1 14th March 2010

The result was that by the end of January the uprising began to lose its momentum.

The growing anger that the Greek people felt towards the state and capitalism, however, did not disappear. Throughout 2009 sporadic clashes between activists and the police continued. Regular protest actions also took place, for example on numerous occasions small-scale farmers blockaded roads throughout the country³. In February this year, the fury that people were feeling once again exploded. For the last two months the Greek state and rich have faced massive demonstrations, which if they continue to grow could rival or even eclipse the December 2008 uprising.

The reason why this new round of massive protests have occurred is because the Greek government declared that it was going to attack the workers and the poor in order to bring down the state's debt – which had largely arisen due to repeated bailouts for the rich. As part of this, it was announced that there would be a decrease in the salaries of public sector workers, VAT would be increased and the social security budget would be slashed. The reaction of workers and the poor to this onslaught was almost immediate. Hours after the socialist Prime Minister George Papandreou announced these measures in late February, anarchists stormed a conference between the Minister of the National Economy and industrialists bringing proceedings to a spectacular halt. A couple of days later public sector workers, including tax collectors, doctors, nurses, teachers, and air traffic controllers came out on a 24 hour strike. During this period Greece virtually ground to a halt. At the demonstration that accompanied the strike, workers confronted the police and attempted to break through the lines using a garbage truck⁴. Indeed, the actions of the protestors were surprising, as

³ www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7852673.stm 27th January 2009

⁴ www.libcom.org/news/public-sector-strike-paralyzes-greece-10022010 10th February 2010

situation whereby the officials linked to PASOK will definitely remain firmly in charge of the largest unions for sometime to come. This means that in order to sustain the protests, workers, immigrants and activists are probably going to have to try and by-pass these union officials through creating general assemblies or worker councils, as happened in December 2008. This strategy does offer some hope and already some student activists and anarchists have started to try and form general assemblies during the current round of protests.

Another challenge that appears likely to be faced is also how to extend the current struggles into the workplace. Perhaps one of the seemingly biggest weaknesses of the December 2008 uprising is that it failed to successfully extend into the workplaces and almost no factory occupations occurred, which means the interests of the rich remained relatively safe. If the current protests could spread into factory occupations then there is a real chance that the Greek state and capitalist system could be fundamentally challenged. It is, however, far from certain that this will actually happen. The only real certainty, however, is that the Greek people are not lying down and simply accepting the austerity measures, and at least for the foreseeable future they are going to fiercely resist them.

union demonstrations in Greece are usually relatively staid affairs, and really marked the beginning of what was to come.

On the 24th of February, another strike was called by the largest unions in Greece. What the union officials, however, had not expected was the ferocity of the protests that would accompany the strike. During one of the protests, over 40 000 people marched through Athens and street fighting broke out between the protestors and the police. Along with this, symbols of capitalism, such as multinational banks were also targeted by protestors who smashed their windows and facades. In the aftermath, some activists briefly occupied the stock exchange along with the Department of Finance. Similarly, workers also occupied the National Printing Works in a bid to stop the austerity legislation being printed; while retrenched workers from Olympic Airways occupied the Offices of the State General of Accountancy for several days⁵. At the same time, anarchists in the city of Yannena also occupied the local headquarters of the ruling party, PASOK, in protest against the austerity measures and the arrests of protestors across the country⁶. This was then followed by a 10 000 strong march to Parliament on the 5th of March. Outside of Parliament, small skirmishes started between the protestors and the riot police. During this, Manolis Glezos, an anti-Nazi resistance fighter who lowered the Nazi flag from the Acropolis during World War Two, had tear gas fired directly into his face by the riot police. As a result, the protestors retaliated and flaming barricades were erected on some of the streets⁷.

Clearly, the Greek state was frightened by the intensity of these protests. In the days that followed a police official

⁵ www.libcom.org/news/mass-strikes-greece-response-new-measures-04032010 4th March 2010

⁶ www.libcom.org/news/state-war-declared-greek-pm-02032010 2nd March 2010

⁷ www.occupiedlondon.org/.../205-manolis-glezos-tear-gassed-reformist-trade-union-leader-attacked-by-demonstrators 6th March 2010

announced that “the EU and Greek government are ready to dispatch a 7000 strong European police force to repress what might seem like an upcoming revolt”⁸. The words of the official, however, had little effect and resistance continued with another round of massive protest marches taking place on the 11th of March. This saw over 150 000 people taking to the streets and marching on Parliament. On route to Parliament the police attacked a large anarchist block and clashes ensued with tear gas and Molotov cocktails being exchanged. Battles soon spread across Athens and by the evening barricades had been erected in the anarchist neighbourhood of Exarcheia. Along with this a 24 hour general strike was called in which over 3 million people, almost a third of the population, participated⁹. A few days later this was then followed up by another march on Parliament, which was immediately attacked by the police. Many of the young people in the march retaliated by throwing bottles and stones at the police. Added to this, workers at the State Energy Corporation embarked on a 48 hour strike, leaving much a Greece experiencing rolling blackouts. More recently, another general strike was called for, and is scheduled to take place sometime in late March or early April.

Despite the intensity of the protests and the ongoing action, the activists and workers involved however face a number of challenges. Perhaps the biggest challenge they face is that the bureaucrats within two of the largest union federations, the private sector GSEE and the public sector ADEDY, are closely tied to the party in power, the socialist PASOK, which is the driving force behind the austerity plans. In fact, GSEE and the ADEDY officials have often used the unions as safety valves through which workers could vent their anger, but never re-

⁸ www.occupiedlondon.org/blog/2010/03/10/210-%E2%80%99Chow-would-it-feel-if-a-foreign-policeman-was-beating-you-up-in-athens-the-greek-uprising-is-truly-going-european/ 10th March 2010

⁹ libcom.org 11th March 2010

ally challenge the system. In the past when protests in Greece have escalated these officials have withdrawn GSEE and ADEDY support. Once again there appear to be signs that these officials are planning to repeat this currently. For instance, initially another general strike had been scheduled to take place on the 16th of March. The GSEE and ADEDY officials, however, postponed this under the guise that it was too close to the previous general strike and that the unions were going to be involved in congresses over this period. They, therefore, rescheduled the next general strike for April in a move which looks like it could be designed to halt the momentum of the protests.

If the momentum of the protests is to be maintained then the power of the union bureaucrats to set the agenda needs to be broken. In the long run, this could possibly be done through workers embarking on a struggle against the union bureaucrats in order to transform the unions into self-managed, radical, and non-hierarchical organisations controlled by the workers themselves. Already there are signs that such a process may have begun. During the 5th of March protests, the head of the GSEE was attacked by protestors and accused of being a sell out. He was pelted food and stones and eventually forced to take refuge in the Greek Parliament behind an army of riot police¹⁰. Indeed, these actions by the workers may be an early sign that they intend try to wage a struggle to drive the unions in a more radical direction, and to transform them into radical bottom up organisations. The struggle to transform the unions into bottom up organisations, however, is a long term process and whether such a battle can even be won, given the extent of the bureaucratisation of the unions, is an open question. In any case, what is certain is that such a battle or victory probably will not be achieved any time soon – which translates into a

¹⁰ www.libcom.org/news/long-battles-erupt-athens-protest-march-05032010 5th March 2010