

Europe's ruling elite fear the "contagion" from Greece

15 December 2008

It is necessary for working people, especially the young, to consider the broader implications of the past week's events in Greece. It is, after all, a question that is occupying the thoughts of senior figures within the ruling elites of Europe and the United States.

The rioting that has engulfed Greece had its spark in the police killing of a 15-year-old boy, Alexis Grigoropoulos. But this ignited a seething mass of discontent, especially amongst Greece's youth and its student population. Despite the efforts of the New Democracy government and its nominal opponents on the official left to blame anarchist agitators, only this social opposition can account for the sustained character of the protests and their spread throughout the country, even in the face of brutal repression.

Numerous reports have drawn attention to the dire situation facing the younger generation in Greece, even those who have graduated from university. Unemployment affects one in four 15-to-24-year-olds, even in advance of the full impact of the slump in the world economy. Post-graduates are routinely forced to take minimum wage jobs at just €600 a month, if they are lucky. Some work two jobs in order to survive.

Andre Gerolymatos wrote in Canada's *Globe and Mail* that "the predominant factor for the actions of such young people is a sense of hopelessness," noting that unemployment for those between 15 and 20 is "just over 22 per cent." He continued: "It's no coincidence that most of the rioters fall within that age group. In effect, one in four young men and women face a future of low-paying jobs and poverty."

The situation in Greece is dire, but it is by no means

the exception. Across Europe a similar picture is developing. Hence the commentaries to the effect that Greece is emblematic of what the *Wall Street Journal* acknowledges to be "growing discontent among youths in many European countries."

The *Journal* noted that young people in Greece have been "dubbed 'Generation 600'—referring to the country's national minimum wage of €600." It then listed similar designations: In Germany it is "Generation Intern" because graduates "have found themselves working as interns for no or low pay for long periods."

In Spain, young people are referred to as "mileuristas" — "loosely, those who scrape by on a thousand euros a month ... entering the workplace with few benefits or protections, often moving between temporary contracts."

In a more extensive December 9 comment on Spain, *Bloomberg* noted that its "Best Generation" is being hit hardest as "boom turns to bust." Some 28 percent of Spain's young people are out of work, twice the European Union average. Fully 63 percent of those between the ages of 15 and 24 who were working were on temporary contracts last year, "so the young people are the first ones to lose their jobs and they're losing them massively," explained Gayle Allard, vice-rector of the Instituto de Empresa business school in Madrid.

The average net monthly salary for people under age 29 is just €964. Only 55 percent of young workers can afford all their costs, according to a government report.

The day before Alexis Grigoropoulos was killed, *Forbes* ran a report by Selcuk Gokoluk warning,

“Rising unemployment among young Turks threatens to fuel social unrest.” Bulent Pirlir, general secretary of an employers’ group, stated, “Turkey has a young population. If they are not educated and employed, it means you have a bomb in your hands.”

Forbes continued: “Data shows that 1.09 million people are registered at the state unemployment agency, but it is advertising only 14,526 job offers. More than one third of the jobless claims registered last month were made by people aged 15-24.”

The *Telegraph* in Britain featured an article in its December 8 business pages by Constantine Courcoulas insisting, “Investors are wrong to ignore the Greek riots.”

After warning that the present “uproar is unprecedented” and “no longer limited to an anarchist fringe” due to “widespread anger at the government,” Courcoulas wrote that “the tensions created by unemployment, marginalised youth and incompetent governments are far from exclusively Hellenic. Similar outbreaks are possible in other countries. Recessions are always tough on the young. And while the Greek rioters’ slogan— ‘bullets for your youth, money for your banks’—may not qualify as sound socioeconomic analysis, it has a catchy ring.”

He concluded, “Social protests have sometimes changed the world. Think of the French and Russian revolutions.”

Writing for the Associated Press, a similar appraisal was made by Paul Haven, who stated that the “authorities in Europe worry conditions are ripe for the contagion to spread” as the continent “plunges into recession.”

Most tellingly, the *Scotsman* newspaper drew attention to the response of French President Nicolas Sarkozy to the Greek events. Rejecting budget proposals from his own party that he considered too obviously biased toward the wealthy, he remarked, “Look what is going on in Greece.”

Sarkozy expressed concern that unrest could spread to

France, the *Scotsman* reported. “The French love it when I’m in a carriage with Carla, but at the same time they’ve guillotined a king,” he said.

The citations above are drawn from leading financial journals, newspapers with a distinctly right-wing colouration and organs generally designated as newspapers “of record.” They are serious appraisals made of a growing threat to the capitalist system posed by a generation of young people, often educated, highly intelligent and articulate, who are living on next to nothing. Told for years that an education was all that was required to succeed, they have no prospects for the future despite their sacrifices and those of their parents.

Faced with governments of the official left and right seeking to make working people shoulder the full weight of the economic crisis, and opposition parties that offer no real opposition to this agenda, young people in Greece have taken to the streets in a mass display of anger and frustration. But make no mistake. We are witnessing the beginning of a profound social shift that must assume political forms that will not be confined to the compromised and discredited trade unions and organisations of the official left.

Chris Marsden



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