

Greece: The Syntagma Square movement—no real democracy

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It is not easy to report on the “Indignants”, the protesters in Athens’ Syntagma Square. We spent almost an hour trying to find someone responsible who could tell us about the goals and character of the movement, without success.

First, we went to a stand with a sign in big letters reading “information”. But as it turned out, this was merely providing technical advice on creating and organizing new committees. We were referred to another stand, where in turn we were sent to the press centre of www.real-democracy.gr.

We thought we had reached our goal, but a woman there told us that nobody had the authority to act or speak on behalf of the movement, not even members of the Steering Committee. The press centre was merely tasked with recording the daily discussions and decisions of the Steering Committee and the “Popular Assembly” and putting them online.

The composition of the Steering Committee changes daily—once it was 50-strong, another time 500. If we wanted information, we should consult the web site, which also contains many contributions translated into other languages. We could interview individual members of the movement, but these only spoke for themselves, she said.

There was no one willing to provide information about the objectives and purpose of the movement, and take responsibility for this. This game of hide and seek is not a coincidence. It is justified by reference to the principle of “genuine” or “direct” democracy, according to which the people take decisions directly, without the mediation of political representatives or parties. In fact, it serves to hide the real political objectives of the Indignants.

The so-called “Popular Assembly”, which takes place every evening at nine on Syntagma Square, proves to be a farce on closer inspection. What some of the pseudo-lefts celebrate as the reincarnation of the Russian Soviets in fact rather resembles Speakers Corner in London’s Hyde Park. There is an indescribable din. The audience comes and goes.

The speakers are drawn by lot. They are given just 30 seconds, and may not identify themselves as representatives of political tendencies.

Under these circumstances, a serious debate over political perspectives is just as impossible as taking a truly representative vote. Such things are unwanted. All those who find themselves accidentally on the square can raise their hands to vote. There are neither elected representatives nor mandated delegates. This offers plenty of opportunities for infiltration and manipulation.

The content of the discussions and votes revolves around organizational issues, such as the form and timing of the next protest action. Alternative models for the settlement of Greece’s state debt or proposals for a new constitution can also be discussed. However, a thought-out political strategy, like politics altogether, is taboo.

Its representatives constantly emphasize the supposedly non-political character of the movement. Asking where are the leaders of the movement produces a stereotyped answer: “There are no leaders, just ordinary people.” But in reality, the movement has a conscious political ideology and perspective. The rejection of politics serves to prevent any discussion of a different perspective—or, more precisely, of a socialist perspective.

Walking in Syntagma Square, anyone with a modicum of political experience soon notices that the organizers of the movement are seasoned politicians. Several reliable sources confirmed to us that they mostly came from the pseudo-left organizations like SYRIZA, ANTARSYA and the tendencies within them, but are concealing their political identity.

Yiannis Bournous, a leading member of Synapsismos, which is allied to the German Left Party, boasted in an interview: “We were the very first party to call upon its members, supporters and sympathisers to join the movement on the squares.”

Stratos Kersanidis, the press spokesman of SYRIZA, confirmed to us: “We were all surprised by the movement here at Syntagma Square. It was much larger than we had

expected. But we immediately gave it our support. We are always there and support this movement.”

The Greek pseudo-left organisations work closely with SYRIZA and ANTARSYA. Among those groups affiliated to SYRIZA (in which Synaspismos plays the leading role) was, up until a short while ago, the Greek section of the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI), which is linked to the SAV in Germany and the Socialist Party in England. Actively involved in ANTARSYA is the Greek section of the International Socialist Tendency (IST) and the Pabloite United Secretariat.

The leaders of these organisations are experienced practitioners of left bourgeois politics. They have their own connections to the ruling social democratic party PASOK and collaborate together at an international level. Their members are represented in the German parliament and meet regularly with representatives of the government and the opposition Social Democratic Party, who fervently support the newly proposed austerity measures for Greece. In France, the Pabloite New Anti-Capitalist Party has operated for some time in leading circles of the political establishment. These people are in continual contact with one another by telephone, e-mail and SMS. They appear together at the same international gatherings and write for the same publications.

All sorts of semi-anarchic ideas and democratic illusions are to found amongst the rank-and-file activists assembled at Syntagma Square.

Nikos, an unemployed mathematician, told us the basic problem was not the economy and the government, but first and foremost “the responsibility of every individual to change himself.” Although he regarded “corrupt politicians” as the main culprits for the debt crisis, many ordinary people had also taken on ??debt and bore some responsibility. As a model for the “direct democracy” which is the goal of the Indignants, Nikos pointed to Switzerland, a country that serves as the stronghold for international financial capital.

Dimitros, a waiter, said that a constitutional amendment halting debt payments and improving the social situation were the main goals of the movement. This did not require a government, but committees and campaigns. “We have no interest in what happens in politics, we want to change things ourselves,” he said. Ancient Greece was the cradle of European democracy. “Now Greece will become the model for direct democracy across Europe,” he concluded.

Unlike these confused activists, the leaders of the pseudo-left organisations are very conscious of what they are doing. Last year they backed the unions that were working closely with the PASOK government. Now that the unions are discredited and PASOK has lost massive support, they hide behind the Indignants to keep the opposition against the

government in check.

The call for “no politics” is itself a political program, and one of the vilest sort. It is exclusively directed against a socialist perspective dedicated to the political independence of the working class. This is a crucial factor keeping Prime Minister Papandreou in power. As long as the Indignants limit the resistance to symbolic protests and reformist illusions, he can impose the austerity measures.

The endless and fruitless protests also run the risk that the mood may swing and sections of the hard-hit petty bourgeoisie may turn to the extreme right. The appearance of nationalist symbols on Syntagma Square is an alarm signal in this regard. Historical experience has repeatedly shown that when the working class paralyses public life but proves incapable of taking power, the radicalised petty bourgeoisie orients to the right, calling for a strongman.

It is significant that all the representatives of the pseudo-left parties with whom we spoke downplayed the dangers of a military dictatorship, even though Greece has a long history of right-wing dictatorships and the last military junta was in power less than forty years ago.

SYRIZA spokesman Kersanidis did this with arguments that were both cynical and frivolous, saying the ruling class no longer needed a dictatorship because they controlled the media anyway, and parliament was making decisions that are contrary to the constitution.

Papandreou’s austerity programme, which is dictated by international financial capital, cannot be halted by symbolic protests and public debates. The experience of recent months shows this very clearly. The 15 one-day general strikes called by the unions have not stopped the cuts imposed by the Papandreou government nor have the protests of the Indignants.

The fight against Papandreou’s austerity programme calls for the building of a powerful workers’ party with a thought-out, international and socialist perspective and an experienced leadership. Only the overthrow of the current regime, the establishment of a workers’ government and the extension of this struggle throughout Europe can prevent a social catastrophe. But the Indignants vehemently reject such a perspective.



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