

The political lessons of Greece

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Amid intense pressure from the international banks and the European Union, the Greek parliament last week passed a new package of austerity measures drawn up by the PASOK government of Prime Minister George Papandreou. This latest attack on the living standards and social rights of Greek workers will serve as a global benchmark, with devastating consequences for the European and international working class.

The European welfare state is to be torn to shreds in order to shore up the balance sheets of the European and international banks. A central demand of the banks incorporated into the new austerity package is the privatisation of state-owned industries and enterprises. Basic public services—heating, light, telecommunications—will be hived off to private companies to become a new source of corporate profit.

The profoundly reactionary implications of this policy were indicated over the weekend by the head of the euro zone finance ministers, Jean-Claude Juncker. He told the German news magazine *Focus* that it was necessary to take the process of privatization out of Greek hands. He called for the setting up of an agency, modelled after the German Treuhand, to sell off Greek assets.

The plan would involve the dispatch of economic experts from Europe to organise the most effective (i.e., profitable) program of privatisation. As a result, Juncker said, “The sovereignty of Greece will be massively limited.”

The Treuhand was set up by the German government in 1990 to oversee the deindustrialisation of East Germany after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe. This plundering operation was the initial step in the restoration of capitalist market relations.

From 1990 to 1994, the Treuhand organised the sell-off—and in most cases, the closure—of no less than 12,000 East German enterprises. These companies

employed four million workers when the Treuhand took them over, but only 1.5 million when the Treuhand ceased its operations. Heavily industrialised regions of East Germany were laid waste, and hundreds of thousands of East Germans were forced to migrate to the west to find work.

Successive German governments of the reunified country used the social devastation in the east to break up traditional contract structures and depress wages in western Germany, capitalising on the pool of cheap labour provided by laid off workers from the east. Two decades later, the substantially depopulated former East German provinces still have significantly higher unemployment and lower living standards than their counterparts in the west of the country.

Similar policies applied to Greece, a country with fewer economic resources, in the midst of the deepest economic crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s, would have even more disastrous consequences.

Juncker's proposal amounts to the reduction of Greece to a quasi-colonial status at the hands of unelected financial officials, working in tandem with the Greek ruling class and answerable only to the banks and the major imperialist powers. The Greek bourgeoisie is now discussing drastic measures that would be part of such a policy, including plans to change the constitution to allow the sacking of full-time state workers and a radical revamping of Greece's tax code to benefit the rich.

A dictatorship of the banks is being established in Greece, which is to be a model for all of Europe and beyond. This is despite the fact that there has been no lack of militant struggles by Greek workers over the past year.

How has it been possible to carry through this assault over the opposition of the vast majority of the Greek people? What lessons must be drawn to enable the working class to drive back and defeat the

counterrevolutionary offensive of the bourgeoisie?

It is necessary to draw a balance sheet of the policies of the trade unions and the middle class pseudo-left parties. These forces work to defend the capitalist system against the threat of working-class revolution.

Over the last year and half, the unions, which are largely led by PASOK members, have organised many protest actions. They have done so with the full support of the petty-bourgeois ex-left organisations. The stated aim of the 15 one-day general strikes and other protests was to pressure PASOK to change course. Any mass social and political struggle to bring down the bourgeois PASOK government was vehemently opposed by both the unions and the pseudo-socialist groups. In this manner, these forces have worked consciously to exhaust and demoralize working class opposition to the cuts.

Organisations such as SYRIZA and ANTARSYA reflect the outlook and politics of middle-class forces that in the 1960s headed up the anti-war protest movements and have, over the ensuing decades, moved far to the right. Many of their leaders and members have taken well-paying posts in the universities, the media, the trade unions and the state. Today they represent the interests of a privileged layer of the upper middle class. As the workers become politically radicalised, they offer the ruling class their expertise as long-standing opponents of revolutionary socialism in disorienting the working class.

After a year and a half of cuts at the hands of Papandreou, there is growing anger in the working class against both the government and the trade unions. Precisely to head off the development of an independent political movement of the working class outside of the control of the unions, SYRIZA and ANTARSYA have championed the so-called “Indignant” protests in Greece, which are based on the bankrupt slogan of “no politics”—that is, the continued dominance of bourgeois politics.

In the pursuit of this reactionary aim, they have worked alongside openly right-wing, nationalist forces protesting in Athens’ Syntagma Square. They thereby help promote the nationalist perspective of leaving the euro zone and returning to the drachma, Greece’s former currency. Were the Greek bourgeoisie to adopt such a policy, it would only be the better to impoverish the workers through hyper-inflation.

The only progressive response to the pillaging of the Greek economy by the ruling class is the unification of the working class throughout Europe and internationally in struggle against the financial aristocracy, based on a socialist program. This is the strategy at the heart of the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe.

The first and indispensable step in the fight for this revolutionary perspective is for workers to break free of the dead hand of the trade unions and build new democratic, popular organs of working class struggle—such as factory, work place and neighbourhoods committees of action—to mobilize the power of the working class against the government and the capitalist system.

This fight requires an implacable struggle against the pseudo-left organisations and the Stalinist and Pabloite tendencies that comprise them. Such a struggle is essential to the development of the political consciousness of the working class and establishment of its political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie.

The struggle for socialism in Europe can be conducted only in alliance with workers in America and across the globe. In essence, the cuts carried out by the social democratic government in Greece are no different from those being planned by the Obama administration in the United States or those carried out by the state governments, like the Wisconsin cuts that provoked mass protests this past winter.

The developments in Greece underscore the necessity to expand the influence of the *World Socialist Web Site* and build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe.

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