

Greece heads toward a revolutionary explosion

Peter Schwarz
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The austerity measures demanded by the troika (the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) are driving Greece toward revolution. The protest by 100,000 people in front of the Greek parliament Sunday evening and the rioting that broke out after the police violently attacked the demonstration marked a sharp turn in the mood of the Greek population.

Hardly anyone believes that the austerity measures will lead Greece out of the crisis. The government's repeated claim that the only alternative to brutal cuts is state bankruptcy and economic disaster no longer has any impact because the current austerity measures are already producing a catastrophe.

"We are only allowed to choose between different forms of death," declared one 50-year-old protester to a journalist.

Eighteen months of austerity have produced a social decline that is unprecedented in peacetime. Wages and salaries in the private sector have decreased by 20 percent and in the public sector by up to 50 percent. Over one million Greeks, one in five adults and one in two young people, are unemployed. Only a third of these receive unemployment benefits, which are now due to be reduced from €460 (\$600) to €360 (\$470) per month.

The new austerity package passed Sunday evening will reduce the working class and broad layers of the middle class to a naked struggle for survival. By 2015, an additional 150,000 state employees are to be laid off and an additional €11.4 billion slashed from the budget, with even more cuts in public-sector wages. With prices for basic commodities at Western European levels, survival will be impossible for many, especially if they have to support destitute family members.

One does not have to be a mathematical genius to see

that these measures will not solve, but only worsen the debt crisis. All economic indicators are pointing downwards. The economy shrank by 7 percent last year, industrial output by 16 percent. Despite an increase in the VAT rate, revenues from the tax declined by 19 percent because 60,000 small and family businesses went bankrupt. A further 50,000 bankruptcies are expected this year.

The government budget is now in the black, if one discounts spending on interest and debt repayment. But the level of debt servicing is so high that the total debt has risen over the past year from 140 to 160 percent of gross domestic product.

It is obvious that the shock treatment prescribed for Greece by the troika and implemented by the Greek government is not aimed at "rescuing" the country or rebalancing its budget. Rather, its purpose is to set an example and intimidate the working class in other European countries, making clear once and for all where the real power lies.

The class character of the cuts could not be more evident. While the unemployed and both public-sector and private-sector workers are bled dry, the country's wealthy elite escapes unscathed. They have long since transferred their assets to financial and property markets abroad.

The Greek austerity measures are the spearhead of an international offensive by the financial aristocracy aimed at offloading onto the working class the full impact of the 2008 financial crisis, precipitated by the very same financial elite. The incomes, past social gains and democratic rights of workers are everywhere under attack. The German government, which has adopted a particularly arrogant stance towards Greece, proceeds with the same arrogance against unemployed workers in Germany and will act toward them in an

even more ruthless manner if it succeeds in Greece.

The Greek working class, which has experienced Nazi occupation, civil war and military dictatorship, will not accept a new dictatorship of finance capital without a fight. The combination of despair and anger expressed Sunday evening will inevitably intensify and turn in a revolutionary direction.

The parliamentary elections scheduled for April offer no solution, if they even take place. The two parties that support the current government are rapidly disintegrating and will barely be able to assure a government majority. According to the latest polls, the social democratic PASOK party, which won the 2009 elections with 44 percent, has slumped to 8 percent, and the conservative New Democracy to around 30 percent.

The three largest “left” organizations—the Democratic Left (DIMAR), the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the Stalinist Communist Party (KKE)—together are currently polling over 40 percent. But all three organisations have a long history of subordination to the bourgeois state.

The Democratic Left defends the European Union, has indicated that certain cuts are inevitable, and proposes to transfer 60 percent of Greece’s debt to the EU. SYRIZA has long defended PASOK and now calls for cooperation between all of the “left” parties in the elections.

The KKE campaigns against the austerity measures, calls for separation from the EU, for a unilateral cancellation of the country’s debt, and even for “workers’ and people’s power.” But the party has never broken with its Stalinist tradition and in times of crisis has repeatedly promoted nationalism, collaborated with the ruling class and betrayed the working class. In 1989, the KKE even formed a coalition government with the conservative New Democracy party.

Should any of these parties enter the government in April, they would work to hold back the working class and prevent it from fighting. By paralyzing the working class, they would strengthen the extreme right, which is attempting to exploit the crisis, and pave the way for the military to take power.

Such a “leftist” government would be comparable to the Popular Front government of Léon Blum that came to power in France in 1936 on a wave of labor militancy, only to stab the working class in the back in

the course of the subsequent general strike. The betrayal by the Popular Front paved the way for the right-wing to return to power. Four years later, these right-wing forces acted on their election slogan “Better Hitler than Blum” and established the authoritarian Vichy regime, which partnered with the Nazi occupation of France.

To fight the austerity program of the troika, the Greek working class needs an independent revolutionary program and new organisations dedicated to struggle rather than class collaboration. When the government and the parties supporting it are working to destroy the livelihoods of the people and gut health care and the education system, the working class must itself take responsibility for running the country.

Action committees must be established in work places and neighborhoods to organize the struggle against the austerity measures and prepare to defend the working class against attacks by fascists and the military. The action committees must be independent of the trade union apparatus, which works with the state and the bourgeois parties to make the working class pay for the crisis. Such committees must coordinate their fight at a national level and establish contact with workers in Spain, Portugal, across Europe and internationally.

Such committees can lay the basis for a workers’ government dedicated to the expropriation of the banks and corporations and the reorganisation of the economy on a socialist basis, geared to meeting social needs rather than expanding the fortunes of a financial elite.

Such a struggle can succeed only on an international scale. The European Union of the banks and corporations must be ended and replaced by the United Socialist States of Europe. The prerequisite for this is the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class. This is the program fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections.

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