

Double suicide underscores Greece's deepening health crisis

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The appalling suicide of a mother and son in Athens again underscores the social nightmare being visited on Greece by the troika—the European Union (EU), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The tragedy occurred May 24. The mother, aged 90, and her son, aged 60, leapt hand in hand from the roof of their apartment building in the capital shortly after 8 a.m.

The son was identified as Antonis Perris, an unemployed musician. Since Antonis had been unable to find work, the pair had been forced to survive on the mother's pension of just €340 (US\$427) a month.

The joint suicide occurred only days before IMF head Christine Lagarde dismissed reports that people were dying in the country due to the savage austerity measures being imposed, callously claiming that it was “payback” time for Greek workers.

The night before their deaths, Perris described their deteriorating economic situation and suffering on a well-known blog site.

He wrote, “I have been taking care of my 90-year-old mother for 20 years. In the last 3-4 years she has developed Alzheimer's, recently she also has been having Schizophrenic fits amongst her other grave health problems, so nursing homes won't accept her.

“The problem is that I hadn't foreseen the crisis so I don't have enough cash in my account, although I have real estate assets I sell from time to time, I'm left without cash and we can no longer eat. I borrow money from my credit card with 22% interest even though the banks themselves borrow with 1%. I have other running costs.

“Unfortunately, I have also developed serious health problems lately. I have no solution in front of me. I can no longer live this drama. There's no solution. Does anyone have a solution?”

Perris published some recent poetry he had written in which he denounced a ruling elite made up of “crooks,

bankers, swindlers and their lackeys”. Clearly intending to use his fate to encourage opposition to the Greek ruling elite, his poem included the lines:

If this world you want to fix

You have to change its structure

Before decadence wipes us all out

And:

Without mercy then, without compassion,

Strike them before you're wiped out

Or else you'll live in misery and injustice.

This is only the latest in a spate of suicides. Two days before, a man slashed his wrists in a well-populated square in the capital. Last month, 77-year-old Dimitris Christoulas killed himself with a handgun in Athens' central Syntagma Square, in front of the Greek parliament. In his suicide note, Christoulas said he was taking his own life in order to forgo the indignity of scavenging through garbage looking for food. His suicide note too urged a revolt, stating, “I believe that young people with no future will one day take up arms and hang the traitors of this country at Syntagma square, just like the Italians did to Mussolini in 1945.”

Earlier in the month, a 36-year-old woman jumped from a height of 80 metres into the Corinth Canal, killing herself. After her body was recovered, she was confirmed dead upon arrival at hospital. One week before, a 26-year-old man leapt to his death in the same way.

According to the most recent statistics, suicides increased by 22 percent between 2009 (when the austerity measures began under the previous social democratic PASOK government) and 2011. According to police figures, 1,727 committed suicide over that period, with 598 people taking their own lives in 2011. This is without precedent in Greece, a country that had previously recorded one of the lowest suicide rates in the world.

Two weeks ago, Eleftherios Lykouras, the head of the Attikon Hospital's Psychiatric Department, told a press

conference that the rise in suicides was intrinsically connected to economic insecurity and uncertainty over the future. According to the *Athens-Macedonian News Agency*, Lykouras said, “The reduction in incomes, unemployment and financial difficulties are risk factors for the occurrence of depression symptoms, while the debt is proving to be a critical factor in the link between financial difficulty and depression.”

In his blog posting, Perris cited the lack of vitally needed medical services available to his mother as well as his inability to get the necessary remedies for his own developing medical problems. This is a direct result of the austerity measures imposed by PASOK and New Democracy, which are following the dictates of the EU and the IMF.

Bailout funds, destined for Greek banks, have been tied to the gutting of health care provision. Under the terms of the first bailout, health care spending was gutted by more than 10 percent. Under the second €174 billion agreed in March, another €1 billion cut in health care spending was made. This is equal to 0.5 percentage points of GDP. Its impact has been devastating under conditions in which many Greek workers have seen their wages reduced by up to 50 percent while unemployment has skyrocketed. Millions of people are now being forced to pay the full price for essential, life-saving medicines.

In April, the government suspended payments into the National Organisation for Health Care Provision (EOPPY), on which pharmacists rely for funding to prescribe drugs. According to officials last week, the state health system in Greece no longer has any funds to pay pharmacies for supplying their prescriptions.

People who used to pay prescription charges of between 10 and 25 percent for drugs, including those for treating heart conditions and cancer, now have to pay the full price. They can apply for a refund from social insurance funds that are members of EOPPY, but the likelihood of them ever getting the money back is slim. EOPPY was created last year on the direction of the troika and is now in a state of collapse. Pharmacies are owed a total of €520 million by EOPPY and other social insurance funds for prescriptions already supplied.

Following the breakdown in talks between the pharmacy owners and caretaker prime minister Pikrammenos, pharmacists held a 24-hour nationwide strike last Wednesday. An official from the Panhellenic Pharmaceutical Association told the *Financial Times*, “There is a cash crunch.... The state has stopped funding EOPPY, and they have stopped paying us. We cannot

continue to subsidise the health service out of our pockets.”

Patients in state hospitals are also being forced to go without basic medicines. One hospital administrator told the *Financial Times*, “We used to provide drugs for all patients receiving treatment, but we’re so squeezed now that we ask them to bring their own supplies of prescription drugs.”

There are warnings that Greece could rapidly run out of medicine. Dimitris Karageorgiou, secretary general of the Panhellenic Pharmaceutical Association, warned, “Already we have cancer sufferers going from hospital to hospital to try and find drugs because no one can afford to stock them.

“If the shortages get worse, God knows what we will see.”

Run-off elections are set for June 17, after the first round saw a collapse in support for PASOK and New Democracy. In response, the troika, working in tandem with the Greek bourgeoisie, are letting it be known that further funds may be held up and the country even evicted from the euro if working people continue to resist the austerity measures.

Lagarde is one of the architects of the misery being inflicted on the Greek working class. Her interview made clear that, irrespective of the electoral outcome, workers in Greece can expect only greater suffering at the hands of the troika and Europe’s ruling elite.

Asked specifically about the fate of patients denied “life-saving drugs” and the elderly dying “alone for lack of care”, she responded with contempt, asserting that their plight was as nothing compared to “the little kids from a school in a little village in Niger who get teaching two hours a day.”

Leaving aside the naked cynicism of her remarks, the fact that the IMF director can argue that only when conditions in Europe are comparable to Africa are they worthy of attention, let alone sympathy, speaks volumes.



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