

Austerity without end

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The media has largely ignored the main message from Monday's meeting of euro zone finance ministers: that the Greek people confront years, if not decades, of austerity.

In comparison, the issues headlined by the media—whether Greek debt falls below 120 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 or in 2022; whether lending rates are lowered or a debt haircut is imposed—were of a marginal and largely hypothetical nature. They boiled down to the question of how many food scraps one allows the victim, in order to exploit him as long as possible, before he eventually dies.

Despite their differences on a number of issues, the assembled finance ministers, IMF head Christine Lagarde and European Central Bank President Mario Draghi all agreed that Greece should be bled to the bone. If everything goes according to their plans, Greece will begin to produce a large budget surplus, every cent of which will go directly into the vaults of the international banks. Given the social devastation already caused by three years of austerity, it takes little imagination to grasp that this means the complete ruination of the country.

Greece is being subjected to a social experiment unlike anything known in Western countries since the Second World War. Comparable devastation is associated only with bloody military dictators such as Chile's Pinochet or what took place following the collapse of the Soviet Union, i.e., the looting and destruction of an entire economy at the hands of criminal oligarchs.

Greece serves as a model for all of Europe, and, indeed, for the whole world. Having been bailed out with trillions from the public purse after plunging the world into crisis in 2008, the banks are insisting that these funds be recouped through massive cuts in wages and social conditions.

“Financial discipline” has become a demi-god,

worshiped by all the mainstream parties. They have created their own mechanisms—the debt brake in Europe, the fiscal cliff in the US—to wipe out all of the past social gains of the working class. The profits of the banks and the assets of the rich are sacrosanct, while the social rights of hundreds of millions are trodden underfoot.

Capitalism reappears as described by Karl Marx: a brutal class society based on the exploitation of workers by the owners of capital, resulting in the enrichment of a few and impoverishment of the vast majority.

Resistance to this social counterrevolution is growing apace. Reports from Greece refer to widespread bitterness, anger and indignation. Strikes and demonstrations have swept Portugal and Spain, where similar austerity programs are in force. But resistance does not spontaneously create a viable political perspective.

The trade unions and a host of political organizations are seeking to contain the resistance and lead it into a dead end. A key role is being played by the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA). While condemning the austerity policy in words, it never tires of emphasizing its adherence to Greek membership in the European Union and its readiness to repay Greek government debt. It offers its services to the international creditors as a political alternative to the shaky coalition government headed by Antonis Samaras. It argues that, based on its leftist image and its relations with the unions, it is better placed to enforce the budget cuts.

SYRIZA is being put forward as role model for Europe by a number of pseudo-left parties. In a joint statement, the leaders of the German and French Left parties, Oskar Lafontaine and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, call for the development of “new left political majorities” in Europe, based on the example of SYRIZA.

Lafontaine and Mélenchon express their “dismay” that “the European Union is being used as a tool for general austerity” and that “European social democracy no longer offers any resistance to the instructions of finance capital, its credit rating agencies and the markets.” As if one could expect these organizations to do anything other than what they are doing.

Lafontaine and Mélenchon deliberately cultivate the illusion that the European Union, a tool of the most powerful European business interests, and the social democratic parties can be pressured by protest to represent the interests of working people.

In reality, the social gains and democratic rights of the working class in Greece and Europe can be defended only on the basis of a revolutionary perspective for the overthrow of the capitalist system and the reorganization of society on a socialist basis. SYRIZA, the Left parties, the unions and the array of pseudo-left organizations allied with the unions are vehemently opposed to such a perspective.

A break with these organizations is an essential prerequisite for conducting a successful struggle against the attacks of the European Union. Workers and youth must organize independently and unite across Europe. They must fight for the establishment of workers’ governments and the United Socialist States of Europe. Above all, they must build their own, revolutionary party—the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties.

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