

Social counterrevolution in Greece

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In 2010, the social democratic PASOK regime in Greece imposed the first of five austerity programmes. Its aim was nothing less than to turn back the clock of history by reducing the working class to levels of poverty not witnessed in decades. These attacks were carried out to the letter according to the dictates of the troika—the International Monetary Fund, European Union (EU) and European Central Bank—acting on behalf of international finance capital and the Greek ruling elite.

Within the space of three years, a social counter-revolution has taken place. Mass unemployment now exists, with many others classed as part of the “working poor”, unable to meet their basic needs. People face the real prospect of starvation, relying on soup kitchens and general food distribution programmes to eat, with the Church of Greece alone distributing approximately 250,000 daily rations. There are regular reports of children fainting in school due to low calorie intake. The level of homelessness in Greece now unofficially stands at 40,000.

Public health care is near collapse, and basic provision is either no longer available or unaffordable for millions. Half of all Greece’s unemployed have no health insurance. The Medical Society of Athens, the largest professional body of its kind, recently described the situation in Greece as a “humanitarian crisis”, and sent a formal letter to the United Nations asking for it to intervene.

Statistical evidence attests to the barbarism being imposed on the entire working class population. Data from the EU found that by 2011, 31.4 percent of the population (3.4 million people out of a total population of 11 million), lived on below 60 percent of the national median disposable income. Fully 27.3 percent of the population, or 1.3 million people, were at risk of poverty. More than 11 percent do not have enough heating, electricity, or use of either a car or a telephone

and live in “extreme material deprivation”.

Data is not yet available from the EU for 2012, but the *Guardian* reports that “the proportion of Greek beneficiaries of NGO [non-governmental organisation] medical services in some urban centres was recorded at 60 percent of the total in 2012.”

A survey by the small and medium-sized business association GSEVEE found 93.1 percent of people said they had suffered a loss in income since the financial crisis began. Some 33.1 percent borrowed money from relatives or friends in 2012. Nearly half (49.8 percent) of households fell behind on bills and expenses last year, 48.3 percent managed to just cover costs, and just 1.8 percent saved money.

These conditions will be worsened drastically by the 22 percent reduction in the minimum wage last year to just €586 (US\$788) a month. This was imposed along with further cuts in wages and pensions, the ending of collective bargaining agreements for hundreds of thousands and large increases in sales and other immediate taxes.

The latest official unemployment figure (recorded in November 2012) stands at a record 27 percent, up from 20.8 percent in November of the previous year. Only a small proportion of the unemployed receive a benefit payment.

Some 1.35 million are officially unemployed, but another 3.3 million—including many who have given up looking for work—are registered as “economically inactive”. This combined figure outstrips the 3.6 million Greeks that remain, precariously, employed.

In a country mired in a depression that has now lasted six straight years, more than 30,000 people lost their jobs in November. Mass unemployment has taken its greatest toll on young people, with the level of joblessness among under 25-year-olds now standing at a staggering 61.7 percent (the highest level in Europe).

The trade unions have done nothing to oppose the

savage assault on working people and maintain an alliance with PASOK while organising only protest strikes and refusing to mobilise to bring down the current New Democracy-led coalition. But they have managed to record the bitter fruits of their own betrayals.

Earlier this month the GSEE private sector union federation forecast that 3.9 million Greeks would be living below the official poverty line by the end of this year. This is set at just €7,200 (US\$9,700) per year for an individual.

Constantine Dimoulas, a lecturer at the Panteion University of Athens, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “From 2009-2013 the living conditions of most working people and pensioners in Greece has gone backwards to the levels of the 1970s as they have lost, because of the austerity measures the ‘troika’ and national rulers imposes on them, more than 50 percent of their direct real income.

“If we add on this the loss of their indirect salary, because they have to pay for health services and medicines as well as for public utilities (electricity, water, public transport), Greece is returned once again to the neo-imperialist regime of the 1960s.

“The unemployment total is more than 1.2 million, but only 225,000 receive the residual unemployment benefit for 6-12 months. At the same time employers gained more than €1.1 billion because of the tax reductions or discounts given to them. With this amount of public money, more than 275,000 additional unemployed could get benefits for a period of 12 months.”

One sign of the destitution afflicting wide layers of the population is the resort of many families to burning firewood for heating instead of using oil that is no longer affordable. In the autumn of 2012, the government raised the taxes on heating oil by 450 percent. Overnight, the price of heating a small apartment for the winter shot up to about \$1,900 from \$1,300. Firewood can be obtained for about half the price of heating oil.

The vast numbers of people now using firewood for heating has resulted in the presence of a low-lying smog covering Athens, the capital and other urban centres at night. Many are forced to find even cheaper alternatives and use salvaged wood and broken-up furniture that contains noxious varnishes or synthetic

coatings or chop down trees illegally.

A study by the University of Thessaloniki concluded that the concentration of dangerous fine particles in the air of the country’s second-largest city was on average twice the safety level from mid-November to mid-December 2012—much higher than a year earlier. In Athens, particulate levels have been recorded at three times normal levels. Commenting on the dangers to public health, the Athens Medical Association warned, “We can’t wait any longer. We have enough cancers in our country. The cost of treating people sickened from the effects of the smog will be much greater than that of (fully) subsidising natural gas and heating oil.”

The GSEE survey found that in 2009, workers and pensioners paid €6.5 billion (US\$8.73 billion) or 47.9 percent of all direct taxes. By 2011, this increased to €7.1 billion (US\$9.54 billion) or 55.6 percent of direct taxes. In contrast, the payment of taxes by businesses has fallen drastically, with €4.7 billion (US\$6.32 billion) or 35.1 percent paid in 2009. By 2011 businesses paid just €3.6 billion (US\$4.81 billion) or 28.7 percent of all direct taxes.



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