

Workers, youth in Athens discuss upcoming election

Our reporters
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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team is in the Greek capital Athens, ahead of the general election being held January 25. We spoke to workers and youth about the social and political situation.

Over the last five years the Greek working class and poorest layers of society have been hit with the most devastating austerity programme imposed in any country.

The European Commission Annual Review released this month found that the percentage of the population on the verge of poverty or social exclusion increased from 28.1 percent in 2008 to 35.7 percent in 2013. The number of those having to do without basic necessities of life increased from 11.2 percent in 2008 to 20.3 percent in 2013.

Long-term unemployment in the country rose from 3.7 percent in 2008 to 18.6 percent in 2013. Permanent employment is becoming a thing of the past. In Greece and Portugal, the survey found that 25 percent of the people working part-time were jobless or inactive within a year.

A report published by Eurostat at the end of 2014 revealed that over 122 million European Union citizens were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2013. Greece had the third-worst ranking among the 28 member states, with over 35 percent of the population falling into this category. Another report published in the last week by two Greek business associations found that a third of Greek families are mired in poverty and debt, due to their disposable incomes falling below the poverty line and the increasing level of household costs.

Tens of thousands of people rely on food handouts and soup kitchens organised by charities, churches and municipalities.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers and young people in Athens's main Syntagma Square.

Leta and **Panayiotis** are a couple, and both work in the insurance sector. They are undecided about whom to vote for.

Panayiotis said "one thing is for sure. We won't be voting for [the conservative former ruling party] New Democracy."

Up to now, said Panayiotis, they had been "quite lucky,"

as they still have jobs, but a lot of his friends had been affected by the crisis.

Leta nodded and added, "if the crisis continues we could be affected."

Asked what they thought about SYRIZA, Leta said, "It would be good to have a change but there is a sense of insecurity about the future."

Panayiotis said he did not believe what SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras promises about "cancelling the austerity": "He might have the intention to make some changes but he is not going to be able to because Greece is governed by other countries and the troika."

Andromachi, 31, studied in the UK and Italy, returning to Greece in 2010 just as mass austerity and brutal cuts began to be imposed. She said, "I came back as a student and I had planned just to stay for a year but I found Athens interesting, as I had never lived in the city before. So I tried to see if I could get a job here. But it's very difficult, especially for people with degrees. There are no jobs. You get offered internships but I can't do internships at 31.

"That is why I decided to set up an NGO with some friends. It deals with the problems of second-generation immigrants. For example, these immigrants are not allowed to vote in this election and it's a very important issue at the moment. There are 200,000 migrant children in Greece without political rights. If you add up all the young people my age and younger who went abroad to find jobs and study, they cannot vote as well. So a large percentage of the younger generation cannot vote in these crucial elections."

"My family are among the few lucky ones who still have jobs," she added. "Many of my friends and relatives have suffered. Some took out loans to buy houses and then lost their jobs and so lost their houses. Our parents have invested money for us to study abroad, but then we come back and can't find jobs."

One of the main problems in Greece is the health care crisis. Andromachi has no health care coverage, as she was no longer living at home and did not have a regular income to qualify. "If something happens to me I have to go to a

private doctor and it's really expensive so I hope nothing happens! You have to pay a lot to see a private doctor. It can be €50, €60 or €70."

Andromachi said she was considering voting for SYRIZA and had voted for the party before. "When they were a smaller party they were supporting people's social rights, but we will have to wait and see. When you are the opposition it is very easy to say these things. But when you are in power, what do you do then? I am sceptical but I don't see another option at the moment. I think the previous government have not negotiated with the troika enough. We are part of a chain. The system will lose if Greece goes down. We have seen the debt increase since 2010, so someone is doing something wrong. They are cutting everything and the debt is still going up. Someone should say, 'we just won't pay the debt'. No one can live on €200 a month."

Yetmir is a 20-year-old student who came to Athens five months ago from his home island of Lefkada. "I heard the crisis in Athens was bad," he said, "but I didn't really believe the news and TV. When I came here I saw it for myself. I saw homeless people, people looking in the trash bins for food. We don't have that in the islands as we are just based on tourism. Now I understand how bad things are. I don't think Greece can stand another five years of this."

"The impact of the crisis was worst for those who finished education at around 25 years old and cannot find employment."

Yetmir was considering supporting SYRIZA, "but I don't think what they have said is realistic. All the parties are not realistic. Tsipras is saying a lot of things he is not going to do. He says one thing to one audience and another to a different milieu. Some people are going to be disappointed in him as they really believe him, but a bigger percentage won't be as they don't believe him anyway and think he is just making promises to win the election."

Maria is a singer. She was going to vote for the newly-established To Potami (The River party).

"I love people of the left but Tsipras is not left," said Maria. "They are worse than the capitalists. The way Tsipras and Samaras talk you can read between the lines and see it's about what they can take from politics."

WSWS reporters also spoke to Athens residents who were shopping at the city's traditional indoor market.

Manolis works as a truck driver distributing fuel. He said that things are very difficult financially at the moment as people cannot afford to buy fuel and his income has fallen by 70 percent:

"I used to distribute 2 million litres of fuel and now it's 600,000, as people don't have money. I have my own truck and I get about €1,500 a month gross. I have a daughter who

is struggling too. My wife was a beautician and used to get €1,200 a month and now there is no work anymore."

Manolis was going to vote for SYRIZA as a protest against the previous New Democracy/PASOK government. His whole family used to vote for New Democracy and "now I just want ND leader [Antonis] Samaras to go."

Agathe, a doctor, said, "I would not vote for the right wing, but I don't trust Tsipras either." Speaking about the health care cuts in Greece, she said, "Many people don't have health care coverage and there are also no resources to help people in the hospitals."

Chara is an accountant who intends to vote for SYRIZA. She told us she opposed the many tax rises imposed on the poorest in Greece, explaining that the VAT sales tax now stands at 23 percent. She used to vote for PASOK and said that the [Athens 1970s] "Polytechnic Generation have proven to be fraudsters."

Christian came from Nigeria 23 years ago and is a trained accountant, but works as a painter and pastor. He said, "I am not allowed to vote. I am prevented from voting and I estimate there are around one million second-generation foreigners not allowed to vote. In order to pay rent, you need a work permit, but there is no work. I have never left Greece. I have two children, 14 and 16, and they have no permit, which means they cannot travel outside the country."

Of the elections he said, "I know Tsipras, he is a smart guy, but he won't be able to carry out his promises. The system will not let him. He must dance to the music of the European Union and Eurozone."

The social crisis was having a major impact, he said, explaining, "I owe three months' rent. The last time I had work was the middle of December. I also owe my electricity bill. I owe basically on every bill. You just try to pay off a bit of each bill in order to ensure one does not starve, but very many are starving. It is not just foreigners, but also very many Greeks. It is not a racist issue. After so many years here I regard myself as Greek, and the population as a whole is not racist."



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