

The social crisis in Greece: Part one

“I could never imagine so many homeless people in Athens”

Our reporters
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Since 2009, the most brutal austerity measures carried out in a European country in the post-World War II period have led to the collapse of basic social infrastructure in Greece, including the denial of access to health care for 3 million people.

According to a March 2014 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, 30 percent of the Greek population lives below the poverty line and 17 percent of the people are unable to meet their daily food needs.

Some 300,000 households have no income, and the same number live below the poverty line. Last year, the child allowance benefit, worth just €98.64 a year for a one-child family, was halved for 300,000 families.

Eighty percent of Greeks have cut back on the purchase of basic commodities. Unemployment has hit more than a quarter of the population and more than 50 percent of young people. Many are forced to exist on meagre time-limited unemployment benefits, often waiting months to receive a payment. Once this expires, they are left with no income and no automatic right to health insurance.

According to the FEANTSA NGO, up to 15,000 people in Athens are homeless. The figure includes all those sleeping rough, those in emergency shelters, and those living in temporary, unfit or insecure housing, such as with friends or family or in abandoned buildings. In 2009, 7,720 were recorded as homeless. According to the NGO Klimaka, by 2013 the figure stood at over 20,000.

Hundreds of thousands rely on soup kitchens or other facilities run by municipalities, churches, charities or NGOs. The municipal soup kitchen in Athens alone provides 1,400 meals a day. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited the administrative headquarters of the PRAKSIS NGO in Athens. The remit of PRAKSIS

(Programmes of Development, Social Support and Medical Co-operation) is “the design, application and implementation of humanitarian programs and medical interventions.”

In the group’s 2011/2012 Biannual Action Report, its president, Tzanetos Antypas, described the situation after the first two years of brutal cuts: “Today, our society has a new class of people who live without a job, without a house, without a salary, without documents, without a doctor, without medicine, without family, without social benefits, without any dignity, without a future!”

Marianella Kloka has worked for PRAKSIS for about 18 months as an advocacy officer. PRAKSIS started in 2004 as an extension of Doctors without Frontiers, with a polyclinic as its core, she said. “We were dealing mostly with immigration issues. But after 2008, we began to see a different situation. Apart from the asylum seekers and migrants, etc., and especially from 2010, we had many Greeks who had lost their health insurance and couldn’t access the health care system. They were one step from being homeless or were homeless.

“Instead of dealing mainly with immigration issues and victims of trafficking, we have turned into an organisation that tries to link vulnerable groups with the welfare system.”

There are just over 150 workers in PRAKSIS. They staff units in Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki and Patras. “We have mobile units providing basic health care and the opportunity for HIV testing for free. We also provide services in the southern areas of Greece and the border areas. We have special programmes helping migrants coming to the Greek islands, mainly from Syria, where we have big flows of people.”

An average of 100 people a day will use a PRAKSIS

medical unit. There is a medical centre in Athens and a homeless day centre in the nearby Omonia district.

“We have five types of medical provision—dentists, dermatologists, cardiologists, gynaecologist and a general doctor,” said Kloká.

Migration across the Mediterranean by refugees and asylum seekers has continued to increase, she said. “We have started one new unit opposite Larissis Station [Athens’ main railway station], and the estimate we have for this unit is 40,000 visits a year.

“We have an increase in families that are not able to be self-sufficient. This is just one step from being roofless... For six months we try to cover their basic needs, like electricity and water and shopping at the supermarket.

“Having one third of the population without work creates a very big problem. There are families that do not have even one salary. Ten or 15 years ago, there was a fashion for families to invest and buy their own house. Banks gave loans to families that were repayable in 40 years.

“But when you enter this crisis and find yourself jobless, how do you deal with that? The state should tell the banks they cannot charge interest. They should regulate the banks. But we know this doesn’t happen anywhere in the world, not only in Europe. We have states that are regulated by the banks, not the opposite!”

Access to health care is based on being able to afford health insurance. As a result of the growth of mass unemployment, “more than three million people have been stripped of their health care coverage,” said Kloká.

She added, “With all of the budget cuts and reductions in staff, there is a big problem with services. If you go to the hospitals you can see protests about this all the time. I see at least one a week.

“A family used to have some money in the bank and maybe two houses, so if young people wanted to go away and live elsewhere, and then got hit by the crisis, they went back. If a family member had a severe health issue, the family would find the money for the drugs.

“That has come to an end. The first thing the [social democratic PASOK government of] Papandreou did was to hit the minimum level of pensions. If my mother had 450 euros a month for her pension and had money in the bank on which we are drawing in order to live, that came to an end.”

PRAKSIS runs day centres for the homeless in Athens, Piraeus and Thessalonica.

“I could never imagine there would be so many homeless people in the centre of Athens,” Kloká said. “There used to be a very small number of people who lived in the streets all their lives. Now I see young people in the streets, I see people my age, around 40. They are on the street begging or sleeping.”

She added that Greece is “a state in the European Union that is not able to provide medicine to the people. This something I fought for in Africa. Now I am trying to do the same here.”



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