

On the spot report from Athens

## Protests grow as Greek referendum nears

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2 July 2015

Over the last 24 hours, political organizations have put up posters and banners throughout Athens to call for a “no” vote in Sunday's referendum on European Union (EU) austerity. These were produced by political parties, including the ruling Syriza (Coalition of Radical Left) and the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE). Social organizations, including a food distribution charity, also produced posters and placards against further austerity measures and called for a “no” vote.

Students hung a banner on the National Academy building that declared, “On Sunday we are voting No in the referendum. We say No to the blackmail of the EU and the ECB.” Referring to the campaign of Greece's overwhelmingly pro-austerity media, which are urging a “yes” vote, it states, “We switch off all the television channels. We break the fear.”

Ministry of Finance workers also hung a large banner on the ministry building overlooking Syntagma Square. It stated in English and Greek, “No to blackmail and austerity.”

Syriza Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis denounced the banner, ordering that it be taken down. “Not in my name. The said banner was the initiative of trades unionists who did not seek the Ministry's permission,” he sent via Twitter.

The situation in Athens is sharply polarized along class lines. While most workers say they intend to vote against EU austerity, the government is hostile to these moods. They called the referendum not to oppose austerity, but as a maneuver in negotiations with the EU to continue imposing the cuts.

Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has already hinted he will resign, opening the way for a right-wing government, if there is a “yes” vote. In case of a “no” vote, he promised to proceed with negotiations with the

EU in order to reach agreement to carry out the cuts he has already proposed.

Syriza is terrified of broad anti-austerity sentiment in the population. People everywhere are discussing the referendum and the government's latest moves. While wealthier layers of society defend austerity and support a “yes” vote, workers and the poor want to vote “no.”

At a café on Syntagma Square, an unemployed journalist became embroiled in a heated argument with a lawyer and a physician. “We have to prevent a catastrophe,” the lawyer said. “We have to vote ‘yes.’”

“That is the only logical thing we can do,” agreed his friend, the physician.

“What you want to do is to overthrow an elected government. You want to restart the Civil War,” responded the disgruntled journalist, referring to the 1946-49 war between the British- and US-backed Greek government and the Stalinist-dominated Democratic Army of Greece, which had fought Nazi occupation.

The journalist added, “Your government already destroyed the living standards of the people. That is what you want to proceed with. If you bring [former conservative New Democracy Prime Minister Antonis] Samaras back, you will see what happens.”

“It is the ‘no’-camp that is provoking a civil war. We want the government to resign to give way for a government of national unity,” replied the physician.

The lawyer added, “The Greek constitution has a solution for such a situation. One of the three highest judges has to become prime minister in a transitional government that could negotiate some deal with the EU to stabilize the country. Afterwards we can have new elections.”

After five years of austerity, broad sections of the population do not know how to exist from one day to

the next. They are not willing to accept more austerity as demanded by the EU and proposed by the Syriza government.

At a demonstration against pension cuts outside the Finance Ministry in Athens on Wednesday, WSWs reporters spoke to an 80-year-old retiree. He showed a list with one table showing the pension cuts being proposed by Syriza and another with the cuts demanded by the EU and IMF. Both, he said angrily, were similar and he opposed them.

He said the EU's plan was to bring pensions down to 325 euros, adding that German Finance Minister Wolfgang "Schäuble, [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel and the rest of the EU will kill us or we will kill them."

Since capital controls were introduced by Syriza on Sunday, many pensioners have been unable to access their deposits, as they do not use bank cards, relying instead on deposit books. This is compounded by the fact that the Syriza government, after first saying that pensioners would be able to access their entire benefit, capped the amount at €240 on Monday, then reduced it to €120.

Some banks decided to pay only pensioners whose surnames start with "A" to "I" on Wednesday, the others being told to return later in the week.

The OAEE pension fund announced Tuesday that it could pay pensions Wednesday only at a reduced rate of 50 percent. Tasos Petropoulos, the chairman of the fund, announced that 350 euros would be paid out instead of the average pension benefit of 700 euros, and even this would be paid only if the cash flow system in operation was functioning properly.

Another pensioner on the demonstration said he had worked for 30 years in the shipping industry. Over the last five years his pension had been cut from 1,200 euros to 424 euros.

At the Finance Ministry, there is a permanent protest by the ministry's cleaners. They were sacked by the previous government after the EU and IMF demanded the slashing of the public-sector payroll.

Five hundred workers were sacked, but they mounted a struggle to win their jobs back. Some 300 were rehired by the Syriza government, with Finance Minister Varoufakis stating to the institutions that this would not affect the future restructuring of the public sector. However, 200 of the workers, previously

employed on the basis of inferior contracts, remain out of work.

Their conditions attest to the enormous attacks on workers' conditions over the last five years. These workers were officially employed for 20 hours per week, receiving only 325 euros a month. They told WSWs reporters they had no social security benefits, no redundancy rights and no holiday entitlement. Asked how the austerity had affected her family, one of the protesters, Aglaia, said her mother's pension had been cut by around 50 percent.

In the Exarchia district, WSWs reporters met Marius and Spyros, two young teachers from a public school in the port city of Piraeus. "Our salary was cut by 50 percent over the last years," Marius said. "But the situation of many pupils is even worse. We already have food collection at our school."

"Our generation has no hope," he added. "We can't start a family or even go on vacation. We can't do the things that you usually work for. The 25 richest families have got everything and left nothing for us. We were punished for something we haven't done."

Both said they were repulsed by the TV coverage of the referendum. Spyros said, "I will switch off the television. It is just manipulation that is going on."

Marius said that none of the referendum options offered any hope, "But maybe a 'no' vote could be the beginning of something. Maybe we just have to refuse to pay the debts."



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