On-the-spot report from Athens

Greek workers speak out after “no” vote on austerity

“This is the 21st century—we want more than this”

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After almost two-thirds of Greece’s electorate voted against the austerity measures of the European Union on Sunday, people on the streets of Athens are awaiting, with concern, the first results of the negotiations in Brussels on a new memorandum.

The majority of people hope that Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is able to reach a better deal with the EU creditors after the “no” vote. However, there is not much belief that the government will fulfil the “no” vote mandate and bring austerity to an end. Most people fear there will be new austerity measures, which the mass of the population can no longer take.

At the Agios Ioannis Metro station, Stephanos was not sure if Tsipras would be able to negotiate an agreement with less austerity. “It depends very much on the German and other governments,” he said. “But the people in Greece can’t afford the austerity measures any more. So it would be very difficult for the government if they agree to more social cuts.”

Stephanos is studying chemicals and food. His mother works 30 hours a week in a supermarket and earns just €350. His father is a bus driver. He used to take home more than €1,000 a month, but it is down to €600 due to the social cuts dictated by the EU and International Monetary Fund. The family also has to pay the hated property tax, because they own a little apartment.

For Stephanos and his friend Kevin, the only hope lies in a European-wide struggle against social cuts. “Our ‘no’ vote was a message,” he said. “We have to end the austerity in every country in Europe, not only in Greece. And that is why we have to be united not separated.” After WSWS reporters told him of a growing strike wave in Germany against attacks on workers’ living standards, he said, “German train drivers, post workers and workers at the kindergarten, workers in Belgium, France and here in Greece have to be united in order to fight this crisis.”

Eleni, who teaches art history and fine arts, spoke to WSWS reporters outside the busy OAED unemployment office in Omonia, central Athens. She voted “no” in the referendum. “The clear ‘no’ is very important,” she said. “Otherwise we would go directly into the past. We would have a police state, we would have huge austerity deals, the pensions of the old people would be even worse. My own payment would be even less and less.”

She hopes that the “no” vote puts the government in a better position to negotiate with Greece’s creditors and avoid further large-scale austerity measures. Teachers in Greece are laid off during the summer break and Eleni had to report to the unemployment office. She now claims just €360 as an unemployment benefit. She has problems paying rent, which is €270, because her partner is also unemployed. “My parents help,” she said. “Everybody is helping each other. Some friends are farmers and give us some vegetables. We try to survive.”

Eleni sees Greece as part of a big experiment, involving all southern European countries. She believes that Germany is deliberately working to bring down Greek workers’ wages in order to have access to cheap labour in Europe. “Since we have the same currency, it is difficult to avoid that within the EU,” she said. At the

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same time she is against an exit from the EU.

Asked what perspective she sees to put an end to austerity in Europe, she voiced the hope that German chancellor Angela Merkel changes her view on Europe. “We are people here living, there are not only banks,” she said.

Christos also works as a teacher at a private school and was also laid off for the summer. His wages were cut from €16,000 to just €6,000 a year in the space of less than a decade. He now has to pay for the treatment of his severely ill mother, and has just €250 a month to pay his rent and insurance and to eat.

He hopes there will be a debt release, so that Greece could spend money to push the economy. But he has little trust in the European leaders to agree on this. “The hope is that what we did will give others hope to rise as well,” Christos said, “Because they can’t overwhelm the people. For the interest of the people they have to fuel the little flame we just lit. We need the help of the people of other countries. I don’t think that German people want the Greek people to suffer.”

Eleni is a 24-year-old worker from the Greek island of Crete. She said, “I was not at home so I couldn’t vote. But I would have voted for ‘no’. I think they will try to get a better deal, just a little better than the one before.”

She thought there would be cuts in whatever new deal was agreed, saying, “I don’t think it will be different to that. I’m not really positive.”

Asked how she would respond to an agreement with the creditors based on more austerity, she said, “I voted ‘no’ so I don’t want that deal.” She said that a new deal “would not be worse than it is now. But things will be worse than they were four years ago.”

Speaking about the impact of the social crisis, Eleni said, “The main reason why most people are not dead because of the austerity is that most people live with their parents.”

“I was sure it was going to be a ‘no’ vote,” she added. “I thought only the rich people would vote ‘yes’ and there aren’t many rich people left here. I wasn’t anxious about the vote. We young people were sent into this situation without any warning and now we are like this. We can’t afford to live. I don’t think anyone my age will want to have children if it stays like this.”

Eleni was a student five years ago when the crisis started. “At the start I was already sure it was going to get worse,” she said. Speaking about the situation in Crete she said that more than 70 percent voted to reject the EU austerity agreement, even though the population was not as affected by cuts as those in mainland Greece.

She told the WSWS she was not able to attend the huge “no” vote demonstration in Athens two days before the vote. She expressed frustration that after previous large demonstrations against austerity, “every time something like this happens, something huge, and the population lets out their anger,” the cuts programme eventually went ahead.

Eleni voted for Syriza in January and said, “We really needed something different.” She thought a solution to the economic crisis and incessant austerity “was to make the people responsible for this pay. We can’t just have less money than we need to survive. The rich people need to have less money.”

Eleni said the media had done everything possible to secure a “yes” vote, adding, “I guess with the Internet we have a hope. I think if it wasn’t for the Internet we would not have voted for ‘no’, as the propaganda for ‘yes’ was really hard. Here we were being told that if we voted ‘no’ everyone was going to starve and die on the streets. A woman on the TV said, ‘everyone, the rich and the poor, all want to vote yes’.”

Regarding her situation, she said, “Whatever job I go for I won’t be able to survive without the help of my parents. I don’t want that.” Her previous job was selling SIM cards to passersby for just €400 a month. She said, “Out of that I had to pay for the rent, utilities and food and had no money left. I also have to pay €100 a month for medicine. I am insured for medicine but it doesn’t cover everything, so I have to pay towards it.

“Sometimes I have to ask my parents for some money. We can’t save up as young people. We don’t want to be rich; we just want a normal life. This is the 21st century. We want more than this.”

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