

Workers in Australia condemn Syriza and austerity in Greece

Our correspondents

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Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party have been campaigning in working-class suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne for the public meetings being held in both cities this Sunday, entitled “The pseudo-left in power: Lessons of Syriza’s betrayal in Greece.”

SEP campaigners have spoken with dozens of workers and youth who are following the situation in Greece closely and want to discuss why the Syriza government so shamelessly betrayed the “no” vote in the July 5 referendum. Many understand that the conditions they confront in Australia—with every level of government seeking to slash social services and welfare—stem from the same global economic turmoil that lies behind the devastating austerity measures imposed on the Greek population. The betrayal by Syriza raises questions about the political perspective and leadership necessary to defend the social rights of the working class in every country.

Christian, a 19-year-old engineering student, bought a ticket at Macquarie University in Sydney. He said: “The people in Greece didn’t want the austerity measures that were being imposed by the European Union and they voted ‘no.’ But still their prime minister agreed with those austerity measures and he came out saying he didn’t have a choice—it’s either accept those measures or Greece will be kicked out of the euro zone.

“I don’t think the austerity is right. It is not democratic. The people should have what they want. To me, it looks like the people are confused. They don’t know what’s happening. The people put the government in power so they could have a say, but the prime minister said he didn’t have a choice. I think that holding this meeting is really important because I don’t think enough people know about this situation. If people knew, then you can get the people together and

start defying the governments.”

Among those who have bought tickets for Sunday’s SEP meetings are people with intimate family ties in Greece. Nearly 400,000 Australians are of Greek background, including 100,000 who were born in Greece. Following the collapse of the Greek economy and development of mass unemployment since 2009–2010, migration to Australia from Greece has increased significantly.

Mary, who is currently receiving the disability pension because an arm injury has prevented her from working, said: “The people in Greece have a right to vote ‘no.’ The people shouldn’t be paying for this crisis in Greece. This has developed because of the tax loopholes for the corporations. The people who caused this are the rich. It’s not right that the government has announced another agreement after the referendum. The population said ‘no.’ The people have been shafted by the Syriza government.”

Vasilios migrated to Australia in 1964 as a 15-year-old. After a lifetime working in factory jobs and running his own pizzeria, he is now retired in the Melbourne suburb of Oakleigh. He bought a ticket for Sunday’s meeting, telling SEP campaigners:

“I thought Syriza were going to do the right thing but they did the opposite. They lied to people. They are cutting wages and pensions. It’s very bad. Young people are out of work. It’s about 35 percent of people out of work. The only way people could survive was on the pension, but now they’re cutting the pension down. This is the fourth or fifth time. They are down to €400 a month. It’s ridiculous, especially if you have to support your kids—no clothes, no food, no milk. The big companies pay no tax. I read that they only pay one percent tax. What they don’t pay, workers have to pay. It’s happening everywhere. In America, 60 million

people have no health benefits.”

Brendon Harris, 42, is a musician and landscape gardener. He told SEP campaigners in Sydney’s inner west: “I know people who are involved and it fills me with absolute horror. Pensioners have killed themselves in front of parliament because their pensions were being cut. The world has to wake up and actually hear. I know a lot of learned people who can’t get jobs in Greece and they don’t want to leave their country. They want to fight.”

Peter, 50, a council worker and the son of Greek migrants, said: “My Mum’s 88 years old. She’s been on the aged pension here in Australia for some time and whilst there have been regular requests for money from her relatives in Greece it has got out of control over the past couple of years. The calls are endless, the crises are endless, and the desperation is endless. It could be simple things like needing money for food, or medications for a son, who has a mental illness.

“My mum knows what they’re going through now in Greece. She’s one of four children and they survived the Second World War and the invasion and occupation of Greece by the Germans. She missed most of school. My mum worked in a tile factory from when she was 13 or 14 years-old.

“My grandfather was accused of being a communist and put in jail, so they survived the war with the breadwinner in jail. They came to Australia in the sixties. My mum worked factory jobs, like most immigrants.

“Greece is in conditions of war again, not a military war, but from everything I’ve heard it’s akin to war—the type of poverty imposed on them. The world war and the civil war and the rule of the generals are fresh in the minds of the Greeks.

“When I was in Greece three years ago, I met highly qualified mechanical engineers who were applying for factory jobs in Australia. I remember going to the Acropolis and having university lecturers and professors who knew six languages acting as tour guides, like street hustlers.

“It was pretty clear then that there’s not going to be a democratic or parliamentary solution to this. Too many factions and social layers have stepped outside it. In the midst of this, Syriza is anesthetising the working class. They’ve pumped them full of illusions and now left them in despair or rage and anger, which can only go so

far. If I thought there were serious dangers with Golden Dawn [Greek fascist party] three years ago, what is the situation now? This has now become life and death.

“In the last three years, people are stunned as to how much they have been humiliated. They know there’s a foot on their throat squashing and they can’t believe it won’t stop. That’s what the ‘no’ vote is. I’m not saying it has taken conscious political expression but definitely there is fertile soil for it to do so.”



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