



GSC UPDATE 15 (18 February 2013)

This newsletter describes the effects of austerity measures that Greek people are enduring and resisting. You may be able to help by affiliating yourself or your organisation to the Greece Solidarity Campaign http://greesolidarity.org/?page_id=469, by making a donation or by coming to the meetings and lobbies advertised.

N.B. the next Greece Solidarity Campaign organising committee meetings are at 6.30pm on Wednesday 20 February and Wednesday 20 March, in the ground floor meetings suite, at UNITE the Union Offices, 128 Theobalds Rd, London WC1X 8TN - tube Holborn.

1. **The crisis deepens: the latest shocking official unemployment figures** show 27% overall unemployment and 61.7% for under-25s. Giorgos Mergos, Finance Ministry General secretary commented last week that at 586 euros per month (= less than €3 per hour), the *savagely reduced minimum wage* might 'still be too high'. Some Syriza MPs and members of Syriza's youth wing went to protest with a banner challenging the official to try to live on such a paltry sum. The police removed them using tear gas and two SYRIZA MPs, Kostas Mparkas and Vaggelis Diamantopoulos, were beaten and kicked.
2. **The latest figures show that jobs are disappearing at a rate of 900 a day**, with the Greek economy shrinking by 6.4% over the past year. The Greek Statistical Association reported that during 2011, 40,000 more Greeks joined those living below the poverty line, bringing the total to 3.4 million - *1/4 of the population below the poverty line*. According to Eurostat figures, Greeks have seen their living standards drop by 17% in the last three years - the biggest drop in the Eurozone.
3. **Olivier Blanchard of the IMF now confesses that they 'overdid' the austerity measures**, that their 'forecasters significantly *underestimated* the increase in unemployment and the decline in domestic demand associated with fiscal consolidation.' A very clear analysis of the current situation can be seen in this interview with Costas Lapavitsas <http://democracyandclasstruggle.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/the-greek-trap-by-costas-lapavitsas.html>
4. **Greek unions have called a General Strike on 20 February** in response to the increasingly heavy-handed approach by the Government in industrial relations. In mid January, 'in a pre-dawn raid, **riot police stormed the metro's main depot to remove protesting employees** who had vowed to intensify the strike. State-run television showed police handing strikers civil mobilisation papers. The workers, who had defied court rulings labelling the action illegal and abusive, were told they would face immediate arrest and loss of jobs if they refused to return to work within 24 hours.' (Guardian 25 Jan)
5. **In comparison, the police have either colluded with Golden Dawn or handled them with soft gloves.** The activities of this fascist party in recruiting young people with no prospect of work are well depicted in an Independent article on 'The beast we thought had been

destroyed': <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/greeces-neofascists-are-on-the-rise-and-now-theyre-going-into-schools-how-golden-dawn-is-nurturing-the-next-generation-8477997.html>. There were major demonstrations in the UK and other UK cities against the rise of Golden Dawn on 19 January. The Greece Solidarity Campaign, seeing anti-austerity and anti-fascism as inextricably linked, has agreed to support the **European Anti-fascist Manifesto** which has been endorsed by Syriza and can be found at <http://grecesolidarity.org/?p=777>

- 6. The Greece Solidarity campaign is discussing what role it can play in generating Medical Aid to Greece.** We would welcome any ideas or support people may have. We have received a request for support from a clinic in Thessaloniki who work with migrants/refugees. Joseph Healy has written on **the withdrawal of free antiretroviral drugs for HIV:**

'Just when it seems that things cannot get any worse in Greece, comes the news that antiretroviral drugs for HIV will not be given out any more as part of the subsidised national health system, a system already sorely tested. This has led to large numbers of patients, frightened and confused, turning up at Greek hospitals demanding to know what is happening. The reality of the situation is that without antiretrovirals, people living with HIV will see their immune systems collapse fairly quickly, resulting not only in a range of serious infections but also resistance developing to treatment. Even in many African countries, antiretrovirals are now available free, as not only does it protect the health of those affected but also plays a large role in the spread of HIV.' (Joseph Healy is from Queers Against the Cuts, the LGBTQ anti-cuts organisation)

- 7. Sonia Mitrailia has written powerfully on how the crisis has turned back the clock for women in Greece:** 'The destruction and the privatization of public services imposed by the Troika are today synonymous for millions of Greek women of taking on responsibility themselves for the social tasks for which the state was previously responsible. Concretely, Greek women are now obliged to substitute for practically all the public utility services, for the Welfare State forced to its knees and dismantled by the policies of the Troika. It is they who are responsible for the house, the family, the tasks formerly carried out by the kindergartens, the hospitals, the old people's homes, the unemployment funds, the psychiatric hospitals, and even by the Social Security.

'At a time when young and not-so-young people (even up to the age of 40 or 45!) are obliged to go back to live with their parents because they are unemployed (60 per cent of young people!) and can no longer pay their rent, their electricity bills, their food bills, it is their mothers and their sisters who have to feed them, to attend every day to their physical, but also psychological, condition. And all that is absolutely free! The enormous sums thus saved by the public authorities go directly to the payment of the debt. So you can imagine what this daily surplus of work represents for these millions of women in terms of physical and mental fatigue, of nervous tension and premature ageing.

'It really is the 'holdup of the century', which is never mentioned, about which nobody speaks. That is moreover why they camouflage it under the ideological packaging of a return to so-called family solidarity and to the real 'nature' of women, an ideology which wants to see them in the home, devoted to their role as mothers and wives! In short, what we are seeing is a well organized offensive by the worst patriarchal reactionaries, sealing thus the marriage of neoliberal capitalism with medieval patriarchy!'

- 8. International solidarity in history:** a recent letter to a Norfolk Paper reminded people that Greek people donated 35 tons of dried fruit in response to a relief appeal for those affected by the floods in East England (and Holland) in 1953.

9. **We have held two meetings, in association with AKEL, in North London Cypriot Community Centres.** It now seems that whoever has won the Presidential election in Cyprus faces the threat of bail out measures of the sort imposed on Greece. Unemployment has risen from 5% to 15% in the last two years. Back in January, Angela Merkel arriving at the European Conservative Parties conference, spoke of the need for Cyprus to adopt crippling austerity measures, including privatisation and sell-off of state assets in return for bailout cash.
10. **A personal description of what the Greek economic catastrophe means** for even the once relatively well-off can be found in this New York Times article by Costas Tsapogas, former foreign editor of *Eleftherotypi*, a paper which has now closed :
- ' Like many Greeks caught in the maelstrom of the economic crisis, my wife and I live a day-to-day existence. Since the newspaper where I worked for 23 years (my wife for 17) went out of circulation in December of 2011, we have both been unemployed. Neither of us have received a paycheck in 18 months, as our newspaper stopped paying us five months before it closed. With unemployment for journalists at over 30 percent, and the official unemployment rate at 26 percent, our prospects for this year are, shall we say, not terribly favorable.
- ' Our story is typical of many in Greece, though some are much worse off and some have it better. But like an overwhelming number of Greeks who are struggling just to get enough food, to keep their homes warm and to maintain a semblance of normalcy, we are fighting to keep our dignity intact and avoid the depression that is enveloping our country.
- 'We have been lucky in some ways. Our son, like many young people, has left Greece and found work as a software engineer in Scotland, and we are watching as the country loses a generation of highly skilled university graduates. Our parents, though elderly, are healthy and manage to survive on their pension, which has been cut by almost 50 percent in the last two years. They have offered to share what little they have with us, something common in Greece, where traditional family ties often offset ineffective social welfare programs.
- ' In the past 18 months, we have tried to find work in journalism. With a group of former colleagues, we tried to create a start-up digital newspaper. After months of hard and unpaid work, our primary investor pulled out just a few days before we were supposed to go online, unwilling to take the risk in such a fragile economy.
- 'We have continuously explored other avenues to find work. My wife has taken up baking to help keep us afloat. We are exploring the possibility of exporting Greek agricultural products. In an economy where home sales are almost nonexistent, we managed to sell our small country home. Even though we got less than 20 percent of its previous value, we feel lucky because it allows us to survive for a few more months.
- 'We also managed to get a court order that prevents the banks from foreclosing on our mortgage, so our home in Athens is safe until 2015. We are luckier than the people who are forced to live in their cars , their only property after they lost their jobs and the banks took their houses or their landlords refused to extend them any more credit. They park at a different spot every few days and usually rely on the kindness of strangers for bath and toilet facilities, or relieve themselves at public or private gardens, including, occasionally, our own.
- 'We know we are lucky to have a garden. This January, pruning the trees proved to be psychologically beneficial. This time, though, the pruning went a bit deeper, and I found myself hacking at the laurel tree my grandfather planted when I was born, 57 years ago. Up to now, we were lucky to escape the wood-cutting, wood-burning craze. With the price of heating fuel almost doubling since last year, central heating is mostly turned off. Fireplaces and stoves are pressed into service, even in high-rise condominiums.

'Hence the sting in my eyes every evening when many of our neighbors return to their cold homes and Athens is shrouded in a cloud of wood smoke. Government warnings that pollution has exceeded dangerous levels are dismissed with a shrug, or as another ploy to force people to use the heavily taxed heating fuel whose consumption has fallen by as much as 70 percent. Meanwhile, the Forestry Protection Services are fighting a losing battle to prevent deforestation at a scale unseen since the Nazi occupation.

'We are certainly luckier than the people flooding the city's 191 soup kitchens run by the Greek Orthodox Church. Luckier than the nouveau-poor, like the middle-aged man dressed in an Armani suit, a bit threadbare at the elbows and shiny at the seat of the pants, who tries to look inconspicuous waiting in line at the Koumoundourou Square soup kitchen for his daily meal. Luckier than the very respectable woman who walks six kilometers every day to stand in line for two containers of food and then goes back home pretending to cook, not wanting to tell her sick husband that they can't afford it.

'My wife and I sometimes ask ourselves if we are in a state of denial. But we believe that the biggest danger comes from succumbing to depression, and we both struggled to get out of bed during the holidays. But since then we've gotten up every day and tried to find some way to get ourselves back on track. We'd be happy to start over, but where to start?

'Any new venture requires money, and we have only enough to survive, and credit is impossible to obtain. When we go to bed at night, we realize we have made it through another day. Seven nights, and we've made another week. Like the cloud of smoke hovering over the winter sky in Athens, we want desperately to believe the situation is not permanent. But we can't be sure. We do know the smoke will dissipate, at the very least, come spring.'

These stories represent just a few examples of why the people of Greece need our support and solidarity. Many individuals in the UK, including unions with over 3 million members, are affiliated to the Greece Solidarity Campaign, the latest being Camden Trades Council. But please encourage more to **Join the Greece Solidarity Campaign** http://greesolidarity.org/?page_id=469 .

- solidarity and friendship

- Paul Mackney, Co-Chair, Greece Solidarity Campaign-

Contact us at: www.greesolidarity.org