

# Greece on the frontline of Austerity

Europe:  
Solidarity  
delegation April  
2013



GREECE  
SOLIDARITY  
CAMPAIGN

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The report is made up of reports of the meetings and visits provided by Joseph Healey, Mike Davis, Isidoros Diakedes, Rachel Newton and Jane Beach, edited by Rachel Newton and Mike Davis. Greece on the frontline of Austerity Europe: Solidarity delegation April 2013

# Greece on the frontline of Austerity Europe: Solidarity delegation 2013

## Introduction

The Greek people are at the forefront of a battle fought across Europe. Who will pay for the economic crisis caused by the banks, and what are the solutions to this economic crisis? Do we want austerity and the removal of the rights of ordinary people? Do we need to protect the rich? Or do we need to build a new economy that halts corruption, and which manages the banking system and big business in the interests of the majority?

In Greece, the people have shown mass resistance. What happens in Greece will be repeated in Portugal tomorrow, and in Ireland and Italy the day after. In Britain the Coalition government is committed to the same policies with savage cuts in welfare, pushing down wages, removal of rights that protect people at work, and the haemorrhaging of money from the public sector into the profits of major corporations. At the front line, a humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Greece. The fight of the Greek people to survive and oppose the politics of austerity will affect us all.

The Greece Solidarity Campaign (GSC) was set up in response to an appeal by Tony Benn in February 2012. He called for solidarity for the Greek people resisting austerity. The campaign started following a fact-finding delegation in February 2012 organised by anti cuts campaigners in the UK (the Coalition of Resistance and the Peoples Charter).

One year on, in April 2013 the GSC, in collaboration with the FBU, sent another delegation to Athens. The 14-strong delegation included representatives from the FBU, Unite and the RMT, and two Labour MPs, Andy Love and David Lammy. Through a programme of meetings and visits the delegation learned about the deepening impact of austerity on Greek society; the emerging new structures of support within communities and the building of an alternative model for the future, as part of a mass movement to replace the politics of austerity.



# Background

The EU, World Bank and IMF (known collectively as the 'Troika') have agreed emergency loans to the Greek government to prevent bankruptcy, resulting from the debts built up by the Greek government in the preceding decade. The conditions of these 'bail out' loans are contained in 3 memoranda: May 2010 and March 2012 and November 2012. These include policies of austerity and privatisation and the sale of Greece's publically owned assets.

The Greek economy is shrinking rapidly; by 25% since the first memoranda. If the same policies continue, by 2015 Greece's share of the world economy is expected to be 0.37%, almost halved from its position in 1970. Chief economist at the IMF, Olivier Blanchard, has admitted that the IMF and EU underestimated the extent to which austerity measures are undermining any chances of the Greek economy recovering.

As a result of the memoranda, since 2010 there has also been a rapid drop in the standard of living of ordinary Greek men and women. Mass unemployment, rising poverty and homelessness, and major concerns about public health have emerged as increasing numbers cannot access health care services.

## The political situation in Greece

The next elections in Greece must be no later than 2016, although many are predicting that the current coalition government may not be strong enough to last that long.

The last Greek General Election first took place in May 2012. This failed to produce any party or coalition of parties who could form a government. Much of the support for New Democracy and PASOK (until recently the mainstream parties of Greece) started to fall away in favour of SYRIZA, a party of the radical left opposing the memoranda.

A second ballot therefore took place in June 2012. This again resulted in no one party winning enough votes to form a government. But New Democracy, narrowly beat SYRIZA, and were able to form a coalition government with a slight majority together with PASOK and the Democratic Left. The current Prime Minister is the Leader of New Democracy, Antonis Samaras.

Whether you are for or against the memoranda has become a defining political line in Greek politics.

Those opposing the memoranda include those on the left and the far right of Greek politics.

### Anti-memoranda

- SYRIZA – new party, formed out of an alliance of radical left parties

- KKE – Communist Party of Greece
- Independent Greeks – right-wing nationalists, a split to the right of New Democracy
- Golden Dawn – physical force Fascists

#### Pro-memoranda

- New Democracy – traditional Conservative party
- PASOK – traditional Socialist (labour) party
- Popular Orthodox Rally (also known as LAOS) – far right split from New Democracy
- Democratic Left (also known as DEMAR)

New Democracy and PASOK, politically comparable to the Conservatives and Labour in the UK, were the parties who were in power throughout the years that the Greek government debt built up. They are the parties responsible for agreeing and implementing the terms of the memoranda. All pro-memoranda parties have seen a continued decline in support:

The first Memoranda was signed by the PASOK Government in 2010. This was against widespread popular opposition that brought down the government.

The PASOK government was replaced by an unelected coalition 'Government of National Unity' made up of PASOK and New Democracy, with the support of the far right Popular Orthodox Rally. Those on the left opposing austerity refused an invitation to take part in the new national Government. This Government went on to sign the other two memoranda, agreeing to more cuts and privatisation. During this time many MPs from PASOK and New Democracy refused to vote for the memoranda, and were expelled or resigned.

There were two key features of the results in May/June 2012: First was the falling away of support for the two mainstream parties – PASOK and New Democracy. New Democracy's share of the vote fell from 41.8% in 2007 to 29.7% in June 2012. The loss of the popular vote was particularly dramatic in the case of PASOK who polled 12.3% of the vote in June, compared to 38.1% in 2007.

Second was the mass support for SYRIZA who gained 26.9% of the vote in the June 2012 election, only 2.8% behind New Democracy. SYRIZA first stood in the 2004 election when they scored 3.3%, which then grew to 5.6% in 2007. SYRIZA was originally an electoral alliance of radical left parties and independent MPs, including those who left or were expelled from PASOK because they would not vote for the memoranda. They are the main political opposition and leaders of the anti-austerity movement in Greece.

Since the 2012 elections SYRIZA have maintained their support, currently polling at 26%. This support appears to have consolidated: Polls just before the last elections showed 12-15% were undecided or refused to say, and many of those are thought to have voted SYRIZA. The numbers polling undecided or refused to say now are just 5%.

There has been a further collapse in support for PASOK, now polling at less than 7%. Support for New Democracy has continued to decline, now neck and neck with SYRIZA at 26%.



Whilst small compared to the growth in support for the radical left, the far right opponents of austerity have also seen a strong rise in support.

Golden Dawn went from negligible support to gain 7% of the vote in the 2012 elections, was polling at between 10% to 15%, but has experienced a decline since the arrest of its leaders. They are explicitly fascist and are believed to enjoy considerable support



among the police, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the military. The party is associated with physical attacks on migrant workers, members of the LGBT community and political opponents, the most recent attack being the murder of young musician Pavlos Fyssos. Anti-fascist campaigning has become an important feature of the anti-austerity movement

The other right wing anti-memoranda party is the Independent Greeks. They include many of the MPs who resigned or were expelled from New Democracy for voting against the memoranda. They gained 7.5% of the vote in the June 2012 elections and have maintained this in the latest polls.

### **The growth of a mass movement of resistance**

Over the last four years a movement against austerity has built up in Greece. This movement brought down the Government in 2010.

Now the focus of campaigners is to build a grass roots solidarity movement, providing practical support in communities. Solidarity for All has emerged as a national committee to support these initiatives forming and developing as a network. It is non-party political, but has strong support from SYRIZA whose MPs donate 20% of their wages to support community projects.

The Greece Solidarity Campaign has, on the advice of the Greek Solidarity for All Committee, committed to raise money and support for solidarity projects in Greece providing health care.

# The delegation

Matt Wrack, General Secretary, Fire Brigades Union

Dave Green, National Officer, Fire Brigades Union

Sharon Riley, National Officer, Fire Brigades Union

Geoff Revell, Peoples Charter and RMT

Pilgrim Tucker, Community Coordinator, Unite

Jane Beach, Professional Advisor (Health) Unite

Andy Love MP

David Lammy MP

Daniel Trilling, editor and journalist, New Statesman

Mike Davis, editor Chartist magazine

Isidoros Diakedes, Greece Solidarity Campaign

Rachel Newton, Greece Solidarity Campaign

Joseph Healey, Greece Solidarity Campaign and

Queers Against Cuts

Beniamino Barresse, Greece Solidarity Campaign  
and independent film-maker



# Delegation programme - Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> – Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2013

Sunday April 21<sup>st</sup> – visit to social market on the outskirts of Athens, meeting with Solidarity for All Committee, and mass anti-fascist march in the centre.

Monday April 22<sup>nd</sup> – meetings with SYRIZA MPs, public sector union confederation (ADEDY), visits to Nikaia public hospital, Athens Solidarity Health Clinic, Dikaimoa (an unemployed and precarious workers group), and meeting with Sofia Tzitzikou, a leading campaigner on women's health.

Tuesday April 23<sup>rd</sup> – meeting with leaders of the fire fighters union in Greece and a visit to a fire station, visit to Ellinikon Social Health Clinic, and meetings with LGBT activists and HIV organisations, and with those leading the development of the social economy from Solidarity for All and SYRIZA



# Health services in Greece

## Delegation visit to public hospital in Nikaia

In Greece health services are largely funded through insurance. Similar to National Insurance in the UK, it should be paid by employers, and by people for themselves if they are self employed. Those not covered by insurance are not entitled to free health care, and need to pay charges. Decisions about the numbers of staff to be employed in health services are made by the Government's Department of Health.

The delegation visited the public hospital in Nikaia (Geniko Nosokomeiou Kikaias), a working class district in Athens. It is one of the two largest hospitals in Greece.



At the hospital we met with hospital staff who included the Director of the hospital, the chair of the union at the hospital, a consultant in the Neurology department who is from the national medical assembly/ union of hospital doctors, the Head Nurse, Senior Resident in the Neurology Department, Resident of the Surgery Clinic, and the local SYRIZA MP, Jenny Vamvaka.

## Public health system breaking down

All of the managers and staff who we met at the hospital described a health system breaking down through a combination of major cuts, policies of privatisation and reorganisation, the breakdown of the social insurance system and the growing numbers not covered by any insurance.

Staff described how the latest memoranda is particularly targeted at the health sector, leading to significant shortages in staffing, drugs and equipment, impacting on the quality of care and the conditions that health professionals work in.

## Loss of staff

The memoranda stipulates job losses of 13,000 health workers this year, with 25,000 to follow. We heard about how specialist and experienced staff were forced to take early retirement or were made redundant.

The Director of the hospital told us that there are 700 vacant positions for doctors in Greece, many empty for over two years. The Govern-



ment has promised to fill only 150 of these, but have not said when this will happen. He said that it was a particular problem at his hospital, with experienced staff not being replaced, and a shortage of specialists, and of both doctors and of nurses.

We also heard that because of hospital closures, the time it takes for ambulances to get to people and get them to hospital has greatly lengthened.



As well as job losses we also heard about the exodus of staff from public hospitals. 1000s of young doctors emigrating. – 5000 in Germany alone, and how health ministers are encouraging this, and about the lack of new people going into training to join the public health system – 30 % of places being vacant in some areas of Greece.

“We are losing a generation of new doctors and other clinical expertise. Society will take years to recover.”

The staff we talked to spoke about the impact that this lack of staff has on patients.

Newly trained doctors have to complete one year's work on one of the islands. Because of the shortages and loss of doctors (going abroad etc.) this is not happening as it was, and as a result many islands have no medical cover, and can have not one single doctor.

The hospital's Neurological consultant and member of the National Medical Assembly described what cuts in staff and services means for the Greek health system:

“All of Greece has 35000 hospital beds for a population of 12 million. All are necessary. The Government and the Troika want to make reductions of 1000 hospital beds... National guidelines say that there should be at least 2.7 workers per hospital bed. On this basis we should have 95 000 medical staff. We currently have 69 000 – doctors, nurses, assistants, technicians etc. In the next seven months 5000 more posts (jobs) will be lost from the health system.”

Other staff commented on the situation and how it affected the service at the hospital.



“In this hospital I am a resident in the new surgical clinic. We have 42 beds and usually have only one nurse on a shift.”

“It’s a mess, in chaos, with no longer any development of medical practice.”

“We have one nurse for two or three patients in the Intensive Care Unit and no gloves – it’s like going back to the 1940s.”



“The shortage of doctors and nurses developing in Greece is a third world scenario.”

### **Cuts – equipment and drugs**

We heard from staff about the shortages of specialist equipment, but also of essential day-to-day materials, such as gloves, paper for examining tables, syringes, cotton wool.

“You operate and the next day you don’t have gloves or gauzes. This sends anyone who can go, to private practice.” Senior Resident in Neurology

The same doctor told us that they had resorted to washing and re-using gauzes.

We learnt about the lack of cancer drugs and drugs for chemotherapy, with the hospital running out, half of the beds for radiotherapy patients closing, leading to delays of 4-5 months (often too late). As well as expensive cancer drugs we also learnt that there was a shortage of cheaper drugs.

We also heard about drug companies in Greece choosing to import and re-export because they can get a better price doing this, and members of the delegation had experience of people getting prescriptions in the UK that appeared to have been originally intended for the Greek market (with Greek labelling beneath the UK label).

### **Insurance-based health system coming undone**

The numbers of people not insured was clearly a major issue, and we learnt from medical staff that 600,000 have no health insurance, expecting there to be 800,000 by next June, and by June 2015 they expect to have 1 million with no health cover in Greece. We heard how this has long been a problem for migrants living in Greece. Employers often get out of paying their health insurance. We also heard how the profile of those affected is changing, and that it is now a major issue for all communities in Greece because of rising unemployment. Medicin San Frontiere set up projects to support migrant workers in Greece and now report that the majority of their work is with people from the established Greek community.

We learned that when you lose your job in Greece you also lose your pension and your health cover. Unemployed people receive partial cover for up to 12 months, but then nothing. In addition the self-employed who lose their work generally don't have any cover.

"Increasing numbers of people have no cover, and there is no thought in public policy about how these people are going to access essential health care". Chair of the union at the hospital

We were also told about the restructuring of the insurance industry to have one social insurance company, and that this company has run out of money and hasn't paid for health care for one year, compounding the impact of budget cuts.

### **Impact on public health**

The Head Nurse reported a drop in patient numbers in the last two years, even though evidence shows that need for health care has increased. This situation can only be attributable to more people having no insurance to access health care.

The impact on public health of this growing lack of access to health care was described in desperate terms. Medical staff described people coming into the emergency room but leaving when they were told they need more tests because they cannot afford to get them done; more people coming in for treatment when they are in terminal stages of curable diseases, and people with chronic illnesses waiting until their conditions are acute emergencies before they come for treatment.

A number of doctors said that mortality rates as a result were increasing, but that this was covered up and the Government refused to release the figures.

The Doctors we met also talked about the issues of poverty, homelessness and insecurity impacting on public health.

### **Impact on working conditions and pay**

The health workers we spoke to talked candidly about the cuts in wages, and how this affected them personally.

The Head nurse described how she is at the height of her career, working in nursing for 32 years, has three bachelor degrees and a doctorate, and now earns 1600 Euros per month (£1347). She said that the average wage for the nurses under her had been 1100 Euros per month, but this has now been cut to 600 Euros (£505). She described the problems that many nurses had with debt, having borrowed money based on their previous wages. They also described how loans were taken out at source from their salary to repay the Government who had lent to key workers to buy homes – and that for many the debt accounted for virtually all of their reduced wages. Now they existed on a handful of euros for several months, and some even received negative pay cheques (they owed the Government money).

"We're still hoping it will get better, that's why we are still here, but it is getting worse." Head



Nurse

The Senior Resident in Neurology (junior doctor) said that he gets paid 900 Euros each month.

Staff told how because of shortages they are required to do nine 24-hour shifts per month, but have not been paid for their overtime since last October. They described working over the weekend and still being owed 'time off in lieu' for these days from the year before. They described how they don't take their breaks because of the shortage of staff.

"The hospital relies on emergency cover for ordinary staffing all of the time – it is illegal, but people don't have the strength to say no." Nurse

### **Privatisation**

We learnt that health services in Greece are being reorganised and privatised. The form this is taking includes the closure of smaller hospitals and clinics within larger hospitals. Sections of work in hospitals are being packaged up and privatised, for example administration and cleaning, in spite of this being shown to more expensive. Primary care is moving almost entirely into the private sector.

**"Primary care is the first victim of privatisation." Senior Resident in Neurology**

The staff we met described the public sector as being run down, malfunctioning, dysfunctional. They described how private hospitals were being opened that people with insurance cover will go to by choice, because of the conditions in public hospitals.

The local MP described how with reorganisation of the health services there has been a rise in bureaucracy, leading, for example, to delays in operations

**"Now bureaucratic processes get in the way of the smallest thing"**

**SYRIZA MP, Jenny Vamvaka**

### **Response of the Government**

Andy Love MP asked if the Government was doing anything about the most serious impacts on health, for example in cancer care. The doctors we met said that it was the Government that was causing the crisis in the public health system, and so it would be impossible for them to be seeking a solution to the situation they were creating.

The Director of the hospital also talked about a two-tier system, and whilst not explicitly stating it, the discussion suggested that this was due to some doctors taking informal payments (bribes) from patients in return for better treatment.

"Some people get hospital beds quickly and others have to wait. You work it out." Director of the Hospital

One of the doctors described how the Government rather than tackling corruption has quietly made the practice lawful. Hiding in a law passed two weeks ago about something very different is a clause that says such payments are not bribes but 'thank you' payments, and are acceptable practice. He described how this was used by the Government to push doctors into accepting wage cuts.

## **Resistance**

The Chair of the union said that she was a life long activist, but that there was a loss of activism among members at the hospital.

"Gradually people at the hospital don't have the fighting spirit, they are pessimistic about the future and fear losing their jobs."

However she also described resistance in spite of this. She described how they had found the most effective way is to work with the users of health services and gave the example of a protest of 500 staff and patients outside the hospital. She also described when there was a strike in one of the smaller hospitals, they organised two meetings with people in the community, working with them, telling them what was happening.

In spite of the conditions described, a number of the clinicians we met volunteered at the end of their working day in one of the cities growing number of social clinics. These are free clinics run for people who cannot access public health services.

They also told us about the need for a radical change in the health system in Greece.

**"The only solution is a proposal for a health system financed by the state, not by insurance. So we need to change the law and the system."**

## **Neurological consultant**

NOTE: A few weeks after the delegation visit to the hospital it was reported in the press that a group of 25 Golden Dawn supporters armed with bats entered the hospital in a publicity stunt to 'check' the immigration papers of staff.

Press conference Tzanio hospital Pireaus 23 April 2013

While at the hospital we were invited to attend a press conference the day after most delegates were due to leave, about strike action being taken by staff at Tzanio, another hospital in Athens. Mike Davis attended this on behalf of the delegation.

Tzanio is a large hospital in Pireaus, serving a population of 1.5 million, including the west Peloponese islands.

The press conference announced the planned 24-hour strike by doctors and a three hour walk out by nurses and the press conference involved around a dozen patients and the same number

	2011	2012	%	2013	%
Medical material	8,880,000	7,7782,500	-12.4%	5,400,000	-30.6%
Drugs	7,040,000	6,320,000	-10%	5,100,000	-19.3%
Orthopaedic equipment	1,310,000	970,000	-26%	720,000	-25.8%
Laboratories	2,765,000	2,405,000		1,440,000	-33.2%

#### Spending cuts 2011 - 2013

of staff.

The strike is part of a campaign to stop the privatisation and closure of hospitals and the health clinics. The cuts in services, beds and staff at the hospital were detailed:

The number of beds in the hospital is being reduced from 474 to 430.

The number of doctors was being reduced from 250 to 169.

200 nurses posts had been cut.

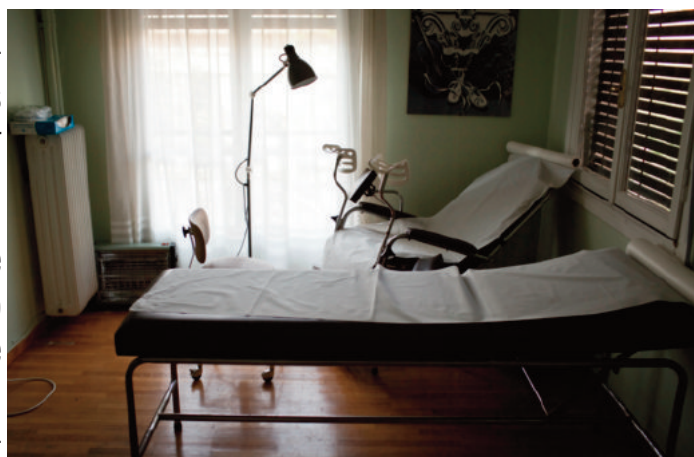
The press event took place in the Diabetes Centre, scheduled for closure. Staff and patients are fighting to save the Diabetes clinic that serves 20,000 patients. The Centre had been running for 30 years. In 1983 when the clinic started 10% of the population had diabetes or associated problems. This number had now grown considerably.

Several doctors and some patients spoke out against the cuts. The main speaker was Dr Melidonis Antiers, the president of the Scientific Committee of the Hospital. He outlined the spending cuts and spoke of the impact of the Memorandum on services. Dr Anemodoura, the president of the doctors of Pireus also spoke.

The impact on patients was described – for example people who have accidents having to wait 10 hours to see a doctor, people with serious conditions wired or tubed with medication but with no bed, and relatives having to play the role of nurse because of the lack of nurses on the ward.

They also described how the rationalisation (closure) of clinics means patients have to travel further and wait longer for treatment.

The press conference heard about the social health clinics that have sprung up in Greece, with more planned, to meet the need caused by the cuts and privatisation of the public health service – run by med-



ical staff on a voluntary basis.

One doctor said that for six months she had been unpaid for extra shifts worked.

The conference heard how a local SYRIZA MP had spoken up for the hospital in parliament, but that PASOK and New Democracy were not supporting the hospital.



Mike Davis gave solidarity greetings from the UK delegation. He said what was happening in Greece today could well happen in UK tomorrow and that we had a common struggle and would be raising the issues of healthcare in Greece in the UK.

### Delegation visits to Social Health Clinics

On the delegation we learnt that there were over 30 social health clinics set up across Greece, including a number in Athens, which provide free health care. These social health clinics have formed into a network, and held a national meeting while the delegation was there, in another part of Greece. Solidarity for All have helped to develop this network, and helps to direct international support in money and materials coming in to the individual centres.

We visited two of the social health clinics in Athens. One of these is in Ellinikon, based at a former US air force base in a suburb of Athens. The clinic is well established and has been used as a model for other 'solidarity clinics' to be set up.

The clinic opened in December 2011 and is witnessing a major increase in patients as the crisis worsens in Greece. From December 2011 to August 2012 the clinic served 4,000 patients. However, from January 2013 to April 2013 the figure rose to 8,631 patients. Other clinics have opened since, demonstrating the rapid growth in demand. The clinic serves patients with chronic illnesses who cannot access the public hospitals and also people who have fallen behind with their treatment as they have been effectively barred from the public health system due to inability to pay insurance costs. This all has had a very negative impact on public health.

The inability of patients to access the public health system is because of the drop in pay and increases in insurance and hospital charges. The main patients are those on low incomes and pensioners. The insurance company now pays





a lot less towards the cost of medicines, so the numbers without access grow.

The clinic is served by doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, psychotherapists and others. They work full-time but also work in the clinic outside of their main employment. There are also many volunteers from the local area.

There is no money circulated. This is intended to remove any opportunities for corruption and also the opportunity for making allegations of corruption. The equipment for the clinic is donated – an example was a dentist's chair and equipment that we saw. Drugs are donated by patients who no longer require them or by relatives of those who have died and no longer require the medication. A large box is placed in the reception area for drug contributions. All of these medicines are sorted by volunteers under the supervision of a qualified chemist and placed in the very large storerooms, which we visited. The clinic does not take financial donations, and if people want to donate to them they ask them to buy drugs and equipment and send this to them. They do a blog for the clinic in Greek and English, and post on there what supplies they require. They said that to date someone has always come forward.

One example of this happened the day of the visit when that morning an elderly woman whose husband had cancer and could not afford chemotherapy treatment came to the clinic to ask if they could help. They did not have any of these drugs, and the woman had left extremely upset. The staff were all saddened by this. Then a few minutes later another woman whose husband had recently died of a similar cancer had walked in with a bag of unused medicines. The staff didn't have the first woman's contact details, but ran after her and just caught her before she got on the bus. The volunteer who described the story told of how overjoyed the woman was, and how incidents like that one make all their efforts seem worthwhile.

Dr Vichas, the founder of the clinic, showed us a typical drug that is required by cancer patients following chemotherapy. The cost of the drug (a small packet) was 1,345 Euros on the open market – this would be medication for a month. He said that many cancers were now treated too late due to lack of drugs. There have been reports of pregnant women being turned away from hospitals as they cannot pay and even a report that one woman who gave birth in a hospital was refused her baby until she could pay the fee.

Dr Vichas said that the municipality (the Mayor and Vice-Mayor of Ellinikon (SYRIZA) has been supportive and the local council pays the cost of utilities and telephone, and placed no bureaucratic obstacles in the way. They said that this was not true of the national Government, which wants to sell of the land on which the clinic is based for property development. There is a dispute between the national and local Government about this. The clinic had drawn up a letter, signed by numerous doctors and medical academics and addressed to the Prime Minister. They wanted this petition signed by supporters all over the world.

Dr Vichas expressed the view that the presence of the delegation in itself was a help and that raising awareness in the UK of the health crisis in Greece and campaigning around it would be a huge service to the solidarity clinics.

The other social health clinic we visited was the Athens Solidarity Clinic in the centre of the city. It was smaller than the clinic in Ellinikon, and had only been established in January 2013. Since opening the clinic has seen 150 patients, and has 50 volunteers. The volunteers include 40 doctors, 10 dentists, paediatricians, gynaecologists and obstetricians.

The delegation met with a number of volunteers at the clinic. One of the volunteers was Dr Haris Matsouka. Dr Matsouka described the work that they were doing.

She explained that their patients were either not entitled to health care because they had not paid their insurance contributions, had been unemployed for over one year, or were not entitled to health care because of their immigration status. They said that roughly half of patients are immigrants and half indigenous Greek residents. They told us that the number of Greek patients coming to them because they were unemployed was rising, with 133 people in Greece losing their job every hour.

She described the growing public health problems resulting in increased numbers not being able to access free health care. Vaccinations are not being carried out. The population is not being tested for TB. She also said that growing number of patients that they saw suffered from malnutrition and were chronically ill. Dr Matsouka said that she did not have any information on HIV/Aids trends (although we heard from others on the delegation that numbers were rising).

We learnt that the clinic is the initiative of Solidarity for All, who had helped it to get set up. Dr Matsouka described how the Medical Union was trying to involve hospitals in the solidarity system of social clinics. Solidarity for All had a network of doctors in hospitals, who the clinic could also send patients to.

We were reminded that Greece traditionally has little in the way of a primary health care system, with patients (if eligible) going straight to hospital. We learnt that the network of social clinics in Greece believes that, as well as meeting urgent needs, it is also forming the model for a new primary health care system for the future. They said that their aim was to have a health care system similar to the NHS, funded by the state (out of taxation) and free for all citizens.

### **Women's health**

On the 22nd April the delegation met with Sofia Tzitzikou. Sofia is a pharmacist who formed a campaign for women's health about two years ago, after the first and second memoranda. The campaign came out of a grass roots initiative called 'Communities Against Debt'. It has established the Unicom Clinic for women, run by volunteers. The campaign advocates for women, lobbies and puts pressure on the government on women's right to services and to human rights, in particular around reproductive rights and sexual health.

She described how there is no longer any proper access to information on contraception or sex education in schools as the budget has been cut. As a result there is a high number of abortions – 30,000 per year, and at the same time this service (as a result of the memoranda) is no longer

free. She also talked about the lack of any proper access for women to sexual health services in the last three years, and as a result STIs are rising.

She told the delegation about the other effects that the cuts in services and introduction of charges has had on women's health. She explained that pregnant women have increasingly high charges if they have no insurance – for example the cost of having blood tests, x rays, examinations in the public health system are three or four times higher than they did before, and prices keep rising. She described high levels of perinatal mortality as a result. Similarly maternity hospitals are now charging for births, 700 – 800 Euros for a delivery, and double if it is a caesarean. She also said that immigrants and foreign visitors are charged more. She described how pregnant women are refused services if they cannot pay, including in situations where women attend hospitals in labour.

Sofia also talked about the impact of cuts on health services generally, medical staff losing their jobs and hospitals closing. She described the situation for people living on some islands where there is no hospital and people have to travel up to five hours by boat, or parts of the north of Greece, such as Limnos, where there is no hospital and people from there have to fly to places like Athens for treatment. She also talked about how charities now help to pay for children's vaccines because parents cannot afford to pay.

Sofia also described how domestic violence is hidden in Greece, with no official figures, as well as the growing problem of unemployment among women, as well as the impact on women of the loss of social services who are taking up most of the caring responsibility.

Sofia talked about the involvement of the campaign with a cooperative of women's groups in Greece, the links they have made with women's groups in France and Italy, and how they wanted to build similar links with UK groups.

On the 22nd April the delegation met with Sofia Tzitzikou. Sofia is a pharmacist who formed a campaign for women's health about two years ago, after the first and second memoranda. The campaign came out of a grass roots initiative called 'Communities Against Debt'. It has established the Unicom Clinic for women, run by volunteers. The campaign advocates for women, lobbies and puts pressure on the government on women's right to services and to human rights, in particular around reproductive rights and sexual health.

She described how there is no longer any proper access to information on contraception or sex education in schools as the budget has been cut. As a result there is a high number of abortions – 30,000 per year, and at the same time this service (as a result of the memoranda) is no longer free. She also talked about the lack of any proper access for women to sexual health services in the last three years, and as a result STIs are rising.

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# Delegation meetings with Syriza MPs

The delegation held two meetings with SYRIZA MPs in the Greek Parliament. One of these took place with three SYRIZA MPs

- Vassilis Kyriakakis (Dr), MP for Lamia in central Greece. He is a neurologist and was president of the doctors union, and was a local councillor for six years
- Giannis Spathas, also leader of the Trade Union of Aluminium Hellas, and believed to be the first industrial worker to become an MP in Greece.
- Theano Fotiou, one of a number of MPs with no constituency, elected from a list of 10. Her professional background is architecture and the University union. She is responsible for the party's support for the Solidarity for All Committee.

Giannis Spathas argued the only way to stop austerity was to oppose the neoliberal politics and economics of Thatcherism, and not just in Greece.

He asked the RMT delegate (Geoff Revell) what collective agreements they had, and how they managed as a union with privatisation. Geoff Revell spoke about the challenges the RMT faced – gaining recognition agreements with a range of different employers. He explained the impact of the anti union laws in the UK, specifically their role in undermining the ability to strike in solidarity with other workers and therefore contradicting the principal of 'An injury to one is an injury to all'. He described how demoralising it had been for activists, but how with a new leadership from 2002 they had worked together to rebuild the organisation, almost regaining the numbers of members previously lost.

Giannis then asked Andy Love MP what the Labour party was going to do to restore workers rights back to a pre-Thatcher position. Andy Love explained that it isn't possible for him to say, the manifesto is being written, and the LP is talking to the unions. He spoke openly about the lack of any action by Labour during 13 years of Government, even though they recognised that labour rights didn't come up to international standards. He said that the leadership of the Party would say that it is sensitive and controversial in terms of the media, and that the media conditions what a Labour government could do in the future, even to bring union laws up to international standards.

Matt Wrack (General Secretary of the FBU) added that this was a major issue for the trade union movement. He also explained that unlike most unions in the UK, the FBU and the RMT are not affiliated to the Labour Party – the RMT was expelled and the FBU voted to leave.

Vassilis Kyriakakis MP described the impact of the memoranda and deep recession in Greece – GDP reduced by 25% and public debt increased; 3.5 million under the poverty line; growing numbers with no health insurance, heat, electricity, homelessness; incomes reduced by 40-50%.

He focussed in particular on the impact on health. As a proportion of GDP health spending was now only 3%. Hospitals were being closed. There were staff shortages and a shortage of basic equipment, as well as a continuing process of privatisation.

As a combined result of poverty and the cuts in services, there has been an increase in mortality and morbidity for people with long-term conditions. Unicef has reported a 50% increase in the deaths of new born babies. It was six in every 1000, and is now is nine. He also described a dramatic increase of people with HIV; people committing suicide for economic reasons; alcoholism and drug abuse. He reported that 60% of doctors graduating in Greece were emigrating to specialise.

Theano Fotiou MP described briefly the impact of the memoranda on education: with a new law voted last month that privatised universities and polytechnics; the shortage of teachers and lecturers, and the schools during the winter having no heat.

She concentrated in her comments on the political challenge that SYRIZA is seeking to grapple with.

Ms Fotiou explained that SYRIZA was 13 parties that had been united in a coalition for four years and was now going through the process of a full unification with the first united congress in July, to agree a unified set of policies. She said that their structure would be democratic, decided by members through congress, rather than parties within a party with their own particular policies. She said that this was a difficult process and there were inevitably differences, but that it was a process they needed to go through, and the differences were mainly tactical ones.

She described the steps SYRIZA had taken. First, how members actively participated in the strikes, the non-payment campaigns, and the squares movement.

“We didn’t understand everything and didn’t agree with everything, but we participated in everything,” she said.

Second, she described how at the same time they built a strong team of scientists, economists, philosophers who could fully understand the debt and explain this to the people.

“We needed to smash the ideas [being promoted] of the lazy Greeks and corrupt Greeks – we offered a scientific explanation and made this clear to the people.”

Third, she described how they needed to propose to the people a programme to escape the crisis, the memoranda, and reconstruct the economy.

She said that all of that was not enough. So the fourth step was declaring that they were ready to leave opposition and to govern.

She outlined their major challenges now. She described how in the last 12 months the mass movement had become weaker; the activism of the strikes and the squares movement has gone

down, and their major democratic challenge now was how to build this back up.

“Parliament acts as a façade of democracy, it is not a democratic tool. So our problem in SYRIZA is not what our role is here [in the parliament] but by what means can we put people again in action. “

She said that obviously they need to get into power, but that the biggest challenge was preparing themselves and the people for action if and when this happens

“Getting in power is not the biggest challenge – we could do that, we may well do that. Our biggest challenge is that people need to be prepared for the worse, but at the same time be inspired to create something new.”

She also spoke about the twin threats of the state becoming increasingly authoritarian, and the growth of fascism (Golden Dawn).

“This week I was visiting a town [Leressos] where the whole community is opposing the gold mining by a Canadian company. Two of the organisers are in prison, with no evidence of a crime. Opposition is being crushed by the police. This is an example of the state becoming more and more authoritarian.

“There is also a danger that society becomes so cruel it becomes open to fascism, to Golden Dawn”, she said.

She described the importance of international solidarity, raising awareness outside of Greece of the public health and humanitarian crisis there. But most of all she stressed that we need to be working together because we are facing the same issues across Europe.

“If we don’t fight austerity then this is your future too. Maybe not next year but it comes and it is close. And we have seen how quickly it runs.”

The delegation also met with Panagiotis Kouroumplis, SYRIZA MP in Athens

Panagiotis Kouroumplis introduced the wider context and immediate history of the economic crisis in Greece, and outlined the changes that SYRIZA believe are required across Europe.

### **A new ‘European model’ - based on inequality and poverty**

He described how what people believed to be the European project, a zone with equal rights and powers was steadily diminishing, and being replaced by “an old colonialist logic.”

He described the consequences of this for democracy. “The tragedy of Greece is that all can see the problems. Greece created monuments, but also institutions, like democracy. But [with this situation] the people are not in control, it is the international capitalist system.”

He described how the economic consequences of the unequal way that Europe has developed over the last two decades in particular were foreseen

“In 1992 negative development was predicted. I warned in parliament of the danger from a Germanicised Europe. We were witnessing the accumulation of wealth in the countries of the north while the south was accumulating deficits.”

### **Inequality causing instability**

He went on to describe how this growth of inequality and increase in poverty across Europe – including in the UK – destabilises society and brings a risk of war.

“Nobody should deceive themselves that the crisis will not break out in Germany, the UK, France. The wealth is being generated, but poverty is growing at a greater rate, wealth for the few, poverty for the many. We must recognise this fundamental principle or all pay the price. The President of SYRIZA is undertaking a tour of the south to form a pan-European movement in defence of human dignity.”

“We in SYRIZA believe there should be institutional changes in Europe – we don’t believe the Euro or Euro Zone should be dismantled but we don’t agree the new economic model with Chinese wages and starvation pensions.

“Keynes at Bretton Woods wanted less poverty throughout the world. If the Eurozone does not distribute surpluses from the north I fear what Jean Claude Junger said—that the demons of war have not died in Europe just fallen asleep.”

Panagiotis Kouroumplis described the impact of neoliberal economic development and globalisation in Greece, including the decline of parts of the agricultural sector and loss of agricultural jobs, where products that used to be produced at home are now imported, a situation that he saw getting worse when the war in Yugoslavia meant trade links were cut.

He also described how the high levels of defence expenditures (6% of GDP, compared to 1% in Holland) were having a detrimental effect on the economy and how it is structured, and how some of the loans that Greece received were conditional on purchasing arms from French and German companies.

David Lammy raised the issue of corruption in Greece and the tax system that does not require shipping owners to pay tax on much of their profit. He went on to describe how the taxation system is needed for the state to function properly, and the problems caused by rich corporations not paying tax.

Panagiotis Kouroumplis described how the problem of corruption is endemic in the neo-liberal system in Europe, highlighting for example the bribes that are believed to have been paid by the Siemens company, and the British company which was taken to court for bribing Greek doctors.



He described the way to tackle corruption and failure of corporations and shipping owners to pay taxes in Greece was through an alternative to neo-liberal economic policies, which essentially is about democracy-- whether the economy is controlled by the people or big finance.

“There is an alternative to neo-liberalism. We are building on the mistakes of social democratic parties in power. The central question is the responsibility of governance in Europe. Will it be an affair of the people, or the financial system? This is the first issue: do we believe in democracy or governance by finance?”

David Lammy described the project of the Conservative Party in the UK to reduce the size of the state, with a far smaller welfare system, and how this was the same project of Angela Merkel. He



asked if the focus of SYRIZA on voluntary activity in communities going along the same lines and was ‘bypassing the state’, and whether that was progress or going back in time.

Panagiotis Kouroumplis answered that while cooperatives and solidarity action are important, in a civilisation it is the state that has the responsibility. He also described how the welfare state can potentially contribute to economic growth, but that the key problem was neoliberalism being introduced into the welfare system – for example the big pharma companies making large profits out of Greece while the health system is in a “critical state.”

Mike Davis (*Chartist Magazine*) outlined some alternative policies to austerity and asked if SYRIZA had other measures it was proposing for Greece and asked what could be done to help?

“We are fundamentally opposed to austerity. It is not the way out of the crisis. Heavier taxes on the rich, a Tobin tax, investment in jobs... What other measures would SYRIZA advocate to pull Greece out of recession?”

Andy Love described the UK’s own experience of receiving loans to prevent economic collapse, and asked how we can encourage a greater understanding of the current challenges faced by countries in southern Europe.

“At the end of the 2WW Britain was bankrupt. We received loans from the US. The UK is a client state in many ways so we understand the challenges of getting an economy on track after the destruction of war. The Labour Party in UK does not agree with the strategy of austerity. We say it’s

too much austerity and not enough growth. What could we do to foster better understanding of the challenges facing the south and Greece?”

Matt Wrack described the opposition to austerity policies in the UK, the effect it is having on ordinary people and the need to work together across countries.

“There is strong opposition in the UK to government austerity. This delegation want to show the real impact [of these policies] on ordinary people and forge common ground.”

Panagiotis Kouroumplis said that the economic task was to redistribute and for planned investment across Europe.

“What kind of growth for whom we have to ask? Wealth in the north should mean redistribution and planning so all regions of Europe can participate. We should have targeted planned investment by the European Bank. We should take advantage of what is strong in every country and the scientific potential -- but it needs flexibility.”

“We believe in real solidarity as well. What about if three or four million pensioners visited Greece in the winter? It would show solidarity and help the Greek economy. The EU should come with an effective programme to combat unemployment. Here we have 60% young people unemployed. We believe the public sector is a tool for growth—a smart public sector, functional, meritocratic... Here we oppose the cuts in wages and jobs which create poverty and destitution.”



# Immigration

Panagiotis Kouroumplis said that immigration was a difficult problem for Greece, and that as a result of the Ireland treaty Greece in his view was bearing a disproportionate level of the costs of providing the support people need.

“Greece was transformed into a warehouse of destitute souls. Who does that serve? The Greek people can stand an influx of refugees from the east, but it is at a big cost.”

“Immigration is a huge burden on Greece due to the Shengen Treaty. Greece bears a disproportionate burden. Ahead of the Dublin meeting it should be agreed that the spread of immigrants is proportionate.”

He was clear that he agreed with giving support to all immigrants in Greece.

“We will support illegal immigrants, this is a civilised response.”

## **The case for reparations from the 2nd World War**

Panagiotis Kouroumplis talked about the reparations and debt that in his view is owed by the German government to Greece, and talked about his own personal experience of the destruction in Greece caused by the 2nd WW.

“I would like to voice a complaint regarding the UK. This small country did not hesitate to stand alongside the UK in the war. We suffered the greatest economic destruction, not just during the Occupation period. I lost my eyesight. Do you know how? In 1961 when I was 10 years old a friend picked up a hand grenade from the 2nd World War. It blew up. My friend died and I lost my eye. 90% of youngsters in school lost their eyesight or a limb as a result of Nazi bombs. Despite the Treaty of Paris ruling for war reparations for Greece it then forced a loan to support the German army in Greece. To this day we have not received one Euro in compensation. In the 1990s we were told we would be repaid when Germany re-united, but nothing. Greece launched the Resistance, unlike in Scandinavia. But Greece is still paying the price. Not one MP in the UK House of Commons spoke about this to give moral support.”

We call on MPs to show solidarity with an historical people whose presence in Europe is a ‘sine qua non’ for the European project. On Wednesday the Greek Parliament discusses the German obligations to Greece from the 2nd World War. We want your support.”

## **The unions**

The structure of the unions in Greece is at three levels. Union organisation in the workplace, union centres, and from these centres, elections to a confederation.

The two main confederations are ADEDY who represent public sector unions and GSEE, who

represent mainly unions in the private sector. ADEDY and the GSEE operate 'under one roof', working jointly. The leaderships of the confederations are very much linked to the main political parties, so there is a balance of representation on their executives of all the main parties. There is also PAME, a separate, smaller, confederation of unions who support the KKE (Communist Party).

#### ADEDY - Public sector trade union confederation

The delegation met with leaders ADEDY. Kostas Tsikrikas (President), Ilias Ilipoulos (General Secretary), (Chair) Odyseas Drivalas, Vice Chair, 2 Executive committee members – Giorgos Harisis and his colleague Christos (Health).

#### Impact of austerity

The ADEDY leaders who met the delegation described the devastating impact that austerity policies are having in Greece, with a drop in living standards estimated to be at least 30%, half a million families with no income, and 1.5 million – over one third of all Greek people - now living below the poverty line.

**"The memoranda imposed by the Troika has effectively led our country to a similar situation in regard to people's rights as in the third world. We talk about being on the brink of a humanitarian disaster. I fear that we may not be on the brink but already over the edge. The numbers of children collapsing of hunger in schools has gone up by 400%. Homelessness and suicides are rising fast."**



#### Kostas Tsikrikas (President)

They talked about the large numbers of young people having to leave Greece to find work – including those trained by Greece to be doctors, chemists, other professions. They described how money invested by Greece in its young people was benefiting other countries and how insulted the Greek people were by Cameron's comments about closing the gates. As well as the economic impact of outward migration, they also reflected on the impact on families.

**"We are losing human capital, but we are also losing our own children. I have a daughter with four university degrees. Just last week she told me she is leaving the country. She will be one of 150,000 young graduates who have left, the best brains in the country".** Kostas Tsikrikas (President)

## Targeting the public sector

In the public sector wages have been cut on average by 40-50%, achieved through cutting salaries and downgrading staff. The Government has declared a target to reduce public sector jobs by 150,000 in the next few years – this programme began last year when 12,000 posts were lost, with redundancies mainly in middle management, and a further 13,000 job losses this year, mainly of frontline staff, with four to five thousand posts to go by July 2013.

Cuts in wages and the loss of jobs are affecting the population because of the importance of the sector to the economy (approximately 10% of the Greek population) and the impact on services.

ADEDY leaders talked about the need to expose the myths about the Greek public sector being over paid and over staffed. They said that on the contrary, in Greece's case EU figures show that spending on the public sector was at the lower end of the UN and EU lists.

“This is a public sector that already had many gaps and problems. They want to destroy it completely.” Kostas Tsikrikas (President)



They also wanted to expose the myth about the ‘lazy Greek’ particularly aimed at the public sector. EU figures show that that public sector workers in Greece work on average 2009 hours each year (over 40 hours per week 50 weeks per year) when the average in many other countries in Europe is 1400-1500 hours per year.

They highlighted that publicised figures for spending on the Greek public sector were vastly inflated by including the 70% of GDP that Greece spends on buying armaments from arms dealers from abroad.

The memoranda policies being followed by the Greek government is not only cutting the public sector, but also privatising it.

In terms of privatization they described both the downgrading of public services, and the opportunities being provided for major corporations to profit from privatisation.

“Multi nationals like Seamans and others, are profiteering, exploiting the Greek public sector”. Ilias Ilipoulos (General Secretary)

We discussed the parallels with policies being followed in the UK, with delegates from the FBU (Matt Wrack, General Secretary) and Unite (Jane Beech, public health specialist) describing the attacks on the public sector in the UK, going through similar issues albeit not as extreme.

“People are watching what is happening in Greece. We in the public sector are seeing attacks



on a scale we haven't seen before. It is not as extreme but there are very similar issues" Matt Wrack, General Secretary, FBU.

"The National Health Service is making huge cuts, impacting greater on services. Unite is working to resist these, and we're interested to hear about how you are doing that here". Jane Beech, Unite.

"We are seeing the downgrading and privatization of the public sector in Greece through neo liberal policies. This has been imposed across the world with the politics of Regan and Thatcher. It has taken a bit of time to come to us but now it is here." Kostas Tsikrikas (President)

"You have the best health service in the world [the NHS]. Yet we can see how it has been undermined by governments over the years". Christos, vice chair.

### **The economics of debt and austerity**

We heard about the debt owed by the Greek Government - EU280 billion debt before the crisis, the cost in cuts in income and new taxes on the people of Greece of 107 billion, yet the national debt during this time has increased to €350 billion.

"When Greece asked for a 'bailout' it was only provided at an exorbitant interest, there were no gifts here. They [the Troika] insisted on 6.5-7% at a time when they themselves were borrowing from the EU bank at a rate of 1%." Kostas Tsikrikas (President)

They described how the policies of austerity and privatization in the memoranda had "instead of resolving the crisis, made it worse".

ADEDY leaders said they accepted much of the criticisms of the state and political parties, including PASOK. But their analysis of the underlying causes of the crisis is that it is international, the 'casino' economics encouraged in all countries. They also highlighted the role of international institutions, including EU in helping to create the crisis, including the Greek debt, and the benefits that the richest countries in the EU had got from the union, at the expense of other parts of the EU.

"Trade agreement and common currently has achieved their goal of richer countries getting richer... richer countries have made a surplus at the expense of the poorer countries".

"When the crisis started three years ago the general perception was that this was a Greek problem. Now everyone knows that is not true". Kostas Tsikrikas, (President)

### **The cause is international so the solution must be international**

The ADEDY representatives talked about the need for international cooperation to oppose austerity policies across Europe and to pose alternatives, and described their discussions with trade unions in Italy, Portugal and Germany for example, with the common goal of transforming the balance of power across Europe.

"We all understand that it is not just about Greece. It is a systemic crisis, not a Greek crisis with implications for everyone. Solidarity between working people across borders has to be our first

duty,” said the Vice Chair.

They also talked about a recent visit they had had from German education unions who opposed Angela Merkel’s policies, and proposed a ‘Marshall Plan for starting again’ for Europe to invest in the real economy and create jobs, particularly for young people, who are in danger of becoming the lost generation across Europe. They also contrasted the way that Government responded to the international economic crisis in 1929, when the public sector was boosted to stimulate the economy, compared to now where the exact opposite is happening.

They welcomed the Greece Solidarity Campaign and the delegation, and the solidarity shown – including the launch of Medical Aid to Greece – as part of this process of working together across national boundaries to create something new, and the importance of the UK labour movement not going. They also talked about how important it is to them that the UK labour movement is not going along with their government in demonizing the Greek people.

They said that this solidarity should be coming from Governments, but they have no expectations of this, but the working people of Greece have the same interests as the working people across Europe.

“Greece has already shown solidarity to others when they have needed it. Greek people are a proud people with a huge history of sacrifice and struggle for democracy and human rights which has contributed something that all people of Europe are enjoying – in the war against Nazism 10% of Greek people died in battle or starved in the aftermath”. Kostas Tsikrikas (President)

“We must get out of their memoranda and overthrow the government and their system. Showing solidarity is an essential part of this,” said the Vice chair.

Dikaimoa – unemployed and precarious workers group –

Members of the delegation met with three people involved in Dikaimoa – meaning ‘Rights’ – a group who support people around workers rights, both unemployed and working, in particular ‘precarious’ workers. The group has existed since 2007.

They work from a community centre in central Athens, sharing the space with a group that supports migrant workers, and a group of lawyers who give free immigration and employment advice. It is also a social place; a café open to all, where they also provide social activities, such as language classes.

The group is run by volunteers, including people who have recently become unemployed.

They described the severe levels of poverty for people becoming unemployed – entitled if they have paid sufficient insurance of benefits of 360 Euros a month for up to one year, and those in work with big cuts in minimum wage and workers often being left unpaid. They said that in these situations people survived by the help of extended families.

Dikaimoa support people to campaign against companies, to unionise and give people advice

and information about their rights and action they can take.

A recent action that they took was to support workers in a factory where the bosses had not paid the workers for a year. By Greece's standards it is quite a large factory, with 45 employees. The group supported 23 of these to use a law that says if the employer doesn't pay them then they have the right to stop work until they do, and keep their job.



They also support the building of solidarity networks – helping them to meet other workers in the same situation. It is a major problem in Greece; – 600,000 are working but still owed pay by their employer from between three months to one year.

They raise money to help individuals, through organising socials/parties. They work on the basis of people who they help being expected to contribute, building up networks of support.

“We call these chains of solidarity. We give and the receiver has to give to someone else.”

They described how they fill the space between unions and the people – to help unionise people, and let people know their rights. They said that unions are not good at doing this, and do not provide information or legal and practical help, so they are filling that gap. Although they work with the trade unions, they are critical of them for a number of reasons:

It was the people not the unions who took the lead in opposing the memoranda, taking to the streets in the Squares movement, and the unions were not relevant to many of those involved. They described how many of the people in the squares movement ran small businesses, were self-employed people, not only workers, and their common focus was for political change. They described what they called the ‘rapid proletarianisation of the petty bourgeoisie’ and that the hardest hit by the crisis at first were the middle classes.

“A big proportion of homelessness is not among the working class but the self-employed. You can see on our streets the shops are all closed. The streets are dark at night. The first thing people don't pay is their insurance, so they are not insured and so get no support”.

They said that this was a reflection the Greek working population – un-





like in the UK, not having a history of industry or manufacturing on any significant scale, instead Greece was and is very agrarian, and with lots of small businesses – at least 90% of employers employ less than 50 people.

They told us that in the first stage of the opposition movement, as well as not proactively organising people, or making themselves relevant to those involved in the squares movement, the unions were calling for a general strike. But their demands didn't relate to what people were calling for. In the first wave of the protests it was not wages that was the majority issue, but the new property tax (similar to the poll tax) against which there was a mass campaign of non-payment.

They also spoke about the unions initially 'conciliatory attitude' to the disintegration of trade union rights in Greece, agreeing to reduced rights for part time work and new workers, while protecting the rights for existing workers. And their decision not to unionise or protect migrant workers, some of the most exploited.

Further they described the close connection that the unions have with the political system and the mainstream political parties, and the state. In Greece until recently the state took a worker's monthly union contribution, half of which was meant to pay for public housing (now being sold off/privatised) and the other half given to fund trade unions. So the relationship that unions had with the state as a result could be termed as 'clientalist'. Furthermore, the unions and political parties were closely connected, with people tended to have careers from one to the other. They told us that because of this many people didn't see the difference between unions and the political parties that the mass movement was directed against.

They described the development of the trade union movement in the last few years. – Before the crisis new workers and new professions were not unionised, and tended to be precarious in nature, with people previously employed made self-employed. They said that for those in unions (15%) there was no direct connection between the unions and members, there was a distance between them. But since the crisis new grass roots unions have been developing they said– e.g. the union of couriers, bank employees, proof-readers, translators. Some of these take part in the main union confederation structures (ADEDY and GSEE), and some choose not to, in particular those run by



young people politicised through student politics, and some are influenced by anarchism. Dikaimoa works with all unions, but in particular these newer ones.

They told us how people had turned against the strongest unions, used by the Government to pit the private sector against the public sector, to gain public support for privatisation, and promote the dangerous division between the employed and unemployed. They talked about how they sought to overcome the challenges of unionising casual workers, by being rooted in the community, and dangers of divisions between the employed and unemployed.

“It is difficult when you see the whole country imploding and youth migrating. The situation crushes everything. You can’t fight for worker’s rights in isolation.

### **The Social Economy**

The delegation met with those activists in Solidarity for All and SYRIZA leading the work to support the development of the social economy and cooperatives.

Stefania Georgakakou— developing economic policy for SYRIZA including their work on social economics

Georgia Bekridati – working on supporting the social economy at Solidarity 4 All, and on S4A executive committee

Sophie – developing economic policy for SYRIZA including their work on social economics

Antonias – S4A committee and committee for food

One of the major developments in the last two years in Greece has been the growth of cooperatives. While there have long been farming cooperatives in Greece, historically these were close to the state and to political parties, and used by the parties to control unions. They didn’t tend to be run by workers. But now they are being used as a tool for the people, to help meet their needs, as well as developing thinking on how this can be part of rebuilding the economy on a different basis; with workers control.

For SYRIZA, while the social economy is very small at the moment, they are looking to a long-term objective of the social economy forming 25-30% of the overall economy. Their programme is to support the social sector not as a complement to the private sector, but to the public sector, and using the social economy to reduce unemployment and to kick-start the economy





The sectors of business that they are currently targeting for development in this way are tourism, agriculture (including organic and regional produce, including possibly for export), renewable energy and new technology. SYRIZA is looking at the scope for the recreation of cooperative banks that used to exist in Greece on a regional basis, but were wiped out by the 'hair cut'.

They told us that their goal was not to organise initiatives or coordinate them but to provide support, and think about what is the best legal and fair financial framework to help them to grow.

They are also supporting and motivating workers to take over closed businesses, helping them to overcome legal obstacles. – Often they are faced with the choice of taking on the debts of previous owners or having to create a new legal entity. An example of this is BIOME, a factory of 70 workers that produces building materials. The workers were not paid. The owner abandoned the business, leaving big debts. The workers have taken over the factory. While they are trying to resolve the legal issues they are producing cleaning products for sale to keep them going, which people are buying to support them. They can't sell these officially, but the Government is forced to tolerate it, because they can't be seen publically to be blocking it. This case is being used as an inspiration for others in similar situations.

A target at the moment is to try to get unified legislation for different sorts of cooperatives, for social enterprises, for farms – in terms of tax and employment law – as they are covered by many different laws, which makes it difficult.

Another major challenge is that whereas the earlier cooperatives before the crisis were given tax breaks, since the crisis they are being required to pay the same tax as any other business, which is an obstacle when seeking to put small cooperative businesses on a legal footing.

The first sorts of new cooperatives have been in farming.

“A fair exchange between farmers and consumers...Farmers businesses based on needs of society, not for profits, respecting labour rights “

A recent development is consumer cooperatives, with five set up since November. In Athens a consumer cooperative with 300 members is one of the new developments. They haven't yet got a federal structure. Some of the consumer coops are members only. Some sell to all.

We learned more about the social bazaars (markets), an example of which the delegation had visited the day before. These are markets are for people to order directly from farmers, thereby reducing the price for the consumer but having a better price for the farmer. Some of these markets have become coops. Others are looking to see if this works. They are also looking at the potential of networks of coops and joint producer and consumer cooperatives.

They also told us about how they are using online tools to support 'crowd-funding' initiatives (where lots of people give or invest small amount of money) – for example one possibility in development is crowd-funding for a small cooperative to use solar panels to produce energy for the island.

We were told that there were numerous micro coops set up, largely by women, producing traditional food. One example of the kind of cooperatives being formed was a small coop set up by 10 women from a small agricultural village near Thessaloniki. We were told that when the women saw the whole village being practically unemployed, they decided to use their traditional home-based skills to set up a business to package and sell traditional home-made food that would not historically have been traded but made in the home – such as preserves, breads, juices, biscuits. The cooperative is now in its second year and has started to make a profit. The women did originally register their products as organic with the proper accreditation agency, but could not renew it after the first year because of the annual fee. The same issue prevented them from exporting their produce as organic goods to other European countries.

Delegates discussed with the activists some specific areas where the GSC may be able to be of practical assistance.

### **Visit to 'Without Middlemen' social bazaar**

On Sunday morning the delegation visited a social market in a car park Petroupoli, a working class suburb of Athens. The initiative is organised by SPAME, a local solidarity project. We were shown around by SPAME volunteers, and Christos from Solidarity for All. They explained to us how the market works and how it has come about.

The purpose of the market is to organise collectively to provide cheaper food for communities, whilst at the same time giving farmers a better price than they would get from supermarkets. We learnt that for consumers the cost of goods was 30-40% cheaper than in supermarkets, and for farmers the price they agree on is around 30% more than they would otherwise receive.

The market was full when we visited. On sale on stalls and the backs of trucks were all sorts of food goods – potatoes, olives, grains, flour, cheese, honey and many others. We saw people loading up cars and shopping trolleys with basic provisions.

The market is open to all and is used by a range of people – we talked to a woman who told us that she worked as a solicitor, worked 11 hours a day, and earns just 450 Euros per month. We also talked to a woman who worked part time in a chemist and her husband had been made redundant over 12 months ago, which meant that they no longer received any help from the Government – she told us that she had voted SYRIZA but was planning to vote for Golden Dawn next time because she said she wanted to “keep Greek jobs for Greek people.”

The volunteers showing us around said they were also concerned about the poor conditions of agricultural workers – including the case of the migrant strawberry workers who were shot by their employer when they demonstrated about the fact that they were owed wages for a year – and the Blood Strawberry campaign that is boycotting their products.

The market takes place every two weeks on a Sunday and is held at different venues. People are informed via the internet and local adverts where they will be and what will be available. People order what they want, and producers (farmers) bring what has been ordered. The producers bring

the exact quantities; more may be available on the day but is only given out if those who have ordered have collected theirs. On the day people bring their order form, which is checked on the gate, and then they go to each producer and buy the products they have ordered.

As part of the scheme, producers donate a % (1-3%) to SPAME, and volunteers then distribute food to those who cannot afford to visit the market.

We heard about how this is one of many social markets and about how because of its popularity the Government is trying to take it over, ironically using European grants.

They said that both the Government and the EU were putting barriers in the way of the social markets that were springing up, even though the farmers are legitimate tax paying businesses. These barriers include trying to move markets off land owned by the council, or accusing them of breaking EU laws on quotas. However they also explained that local and national politicians didn't want to be seen to be against the markets because they are so popular.

The activist who showed us around told us about how the initiative has grown from nothing in the last two years, from having been just an idea a few of them had come up with when having a drink and talking over what action needed to be taken.

### **Meeting with LGBT and HIV organisations**

The meeting was attended by representatives of a number of organisations.

- Irene Petropoulou - Rainbow Families
- Andrea Gilbert - Athens Pride
- Eva Spinou - LGBTQI Helpline
- Thanos Vlaxogiannis - Thessaloniki Pride
- Nelly Kaouni - Colour Youth
- Konstantina Kosmidou - OLKE
- Eleni - Lesbians for equality
- Marianella Kloka – Positive Voice

The meeting was held after most of the delegation had left, and was attended by those delegates remaining: Isidoris Diakides, Mike Davis (Chartist magazine) and Joseph Healey, (Queers Against Cuts).

Joseph Healey started by asking about attacks by Golden Dawn on the LGBT community. The response was that the attacks were mainly directed against couples. Most of the attacks were also not reported to the police, because many of those attacked were in the closet or feared the police because of their homophobia. There was a great deal of insecurity because of all this.



Thanos, one of the organisers of the Thessaloniki Pride, said that there was no growth in Golden Dawn activity there. At the first Pride march, a volunteer had been attacked and this had been reported to the police. The Bishop of Thessaloniki had denounced the Pride march last year and had stated that he expected people to react. Stalls had been damaged the night before Pride, but despite this, all had gone ahead peacefully with a great deal of support from the Mayor and police protection. Another impediment to reporting attacks was that in order to pursue a prosecution, it cost the victim a fixed fee of 150 Euros. However, there was a problem of constant cyber bullying of the LGBT activists by Golden Dawn and reactionaries in general.

The representatives of the LGBT Youth group felt that many young LGBT people were subjected to bullying and harassment, including in educational centres. Examples were given of a trans girl being attacked at school and of a school principal criticising a lesbian couple (whose parents were totally at ease about their sexuality) and stating that they “disturbed” him. Despite their parents being supportive, he had continued his campaign of harassment. There would be a press conference the following day on hate crime, which included homophobic hate crime and Joseph agreed to attend. We were also recommended to read the ILGA Europe survey on Greece.

There was a general view that homophobic violence in Greece was a non-issue as far as Greek society was concerned – there was simply no discourse. Eva said that it was simply “that we should not exist.”

There had been a recent meeting with representatives of the Green, Pasok and Democratic Left parties and it was agreed that gender would now be included in legislation due to lobbying. But an indication of how invisible LGBT issues were, was that the two biggest unions in Greece had called rallies on the same day as Athens Pride in the same venue in 2010 and 2011. However, last year they had not. The government and media were obsessed with Far Left violence but not with Far Right violence. People generally did not care about attacks by Golden Dawn. Nelly told how she had encountered Golden Dawn marching through the centre of Nikea. When she had contacted the Anti-Fascist organisation, she was told not to worry that they paraded there every Saturday! Golden Dawn were infiltrating schools and particularly trying to recruit among second generation Albanians. Some LGBT people voted for Golden Dawn and Marianella said that some gay men even found them attractive. This led to some discussion on the similarities with Christopher Isherwood’s ‘Goodbye to Berlin’ novel that described a similar phenomenon in Weimar Berlin.

There was a great deal of concern about the cuts to the funding for the Advice Line. A meeting had been held with the Secretary of the Education Department but the issues had not been properly discussed and it was just treated as a joke. Eva reported that there were major problems outside Athens. The project had been funded by the ministry in their offices but there was still no website and the staff had not been paid for four months. The project was the only state funded project dealing with LGBT healthcare and funding would finish at the end of July. Eva felt that the only hope was to try and get funding from abroad. The project was particularly important for small towns outside Athens where there was no LGBT infrastructure whatsoever.



Marianella spoke about Positive Voice and its work in the field of dealing with HIV+ people. There had been a 200% increase in HIV cases in Greece in the preceding two years. Although there had been a steep increase in infection among Men who had sex with men, the biggest increase had been from drug users. The principal cause of this had been the lack of health policies in the last 3 years. Cheap drugs had flooded Greece and pharmacies ended the policy of supplying free needles. In 2012 there had been a 44.8% increase in HIV infection through drug use. Positive Voice had been involved in the 'Aristollo Project' to find, test and treat 3,500 drug users in Athens. The project had found 1,400 and discovered that 20% were HIV+ and 35% were homeless.

There had been meetings with the Health Ministry and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC predicted a 10-year epidemic. In December 2012 the Ministry of Health cut by 35% to 38% the cost coverage of people who want to enter the treatment project. People had been directed to special hospitals. Regular HIV tests had been reduced to six months. HIV treatment was still provided free but now there was no outreach work on the streets concerning HIV.

One of the organisers of Athens Pride, Andrea Gilbert, said that the PASOK Mayor of Athens was reneging on his promises to the LGBT community re Pride. For the last two years, despite promising support, the Mayor had failed to turn up at Pride and this was now becoming an issue. The group ended the meeting by requesting if any of the LGBT groups in the UK, especially Queers Against the Cuts, could attend the Athens Pride as a sign of international solidarity. They were very pleased to meet the representatives of the Greece Solidarity Campaign and Queers Against Cuts and said that they looked forward to co-operating with us in future.

### **Anti fascism and anti militarisation march**

The delegation took part in a mass demonstration to mark the anniversary of the beginning of the junta's rule in 1967, which marched from the site of the old junta prison to Syntagma Square by Parliament.





# Conclusion

The delegation to Athens in 2013 was both inspiring and instructive for those who went. It underlined the common cause of campaigning against austerity policies across Europe, and the relevance of the fight for an alternative in Greece to people in the UK. It also helped us to understand how we can best show solidarity, and how solidarity is a two way street, providing important lessons for all those opposing austerity in the UK and across Europe.

Whilst the detail is different there were echoes throughout the visit of what is happening in the UK. While public spending cuts in the UK are not yet on the scale of those in Greece, the Coalition Government has plans for major cuts year on year in a programme of austerity that we have only just seen the start of. Wages and pensions in the UK are being cut in all sectors of the economy and are continuing to decline. In Greece and in the UK money is being systematically drawn from the public sector into large corporations through privatisation. In both countries we can see how minorities can become scapegoats for the economic crisis. And Greece shows us how the breakdown of trust in political institutions can result in a rapid withdrawal of support for governing parties, providing opportunities for those providing a progressive alternative, but also fuelling support for those presenting themselves as anti-establishment from the far right.

## Actions

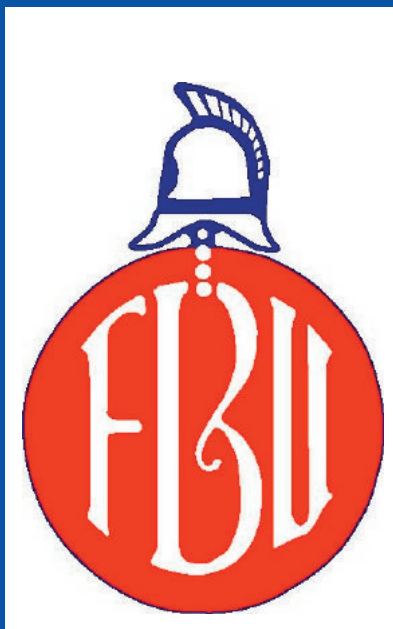
The Greece Solidarity Campaign launched Medical Aid for Greece just before the delegation took place. The meetings that took place showed how important that is, and the delegation saw first hand the grass roots projects and structures through which medical aid from the UK to Greece can be directed. The Greece Solidarity Campaign is committed to taking this forward in partnership with the Greek Solidarity for All committee, in particular the appeal for child vaccines. The campaign will be seeking support from health unions and professional bodies in the UK to raise funds and supplies. The campaign is also planning a series of fundraising and awareness raising activities for the Medical Aid appeal.

The other area for activity suggested by the visit is work by the Greece Solidarity Campaign to scope opportunities to promote Greek coop-produced products in the UK, and to build support for Greece among organisations in the cooperative movement in the UK, such as the Cooperative Party and the Cooperative College. Andy Love offered his experience in this process, from his involvement in the development of legislation to support the growth of cooperatives and a cooperative funding organisation in the UK. As a result of the delegation the FBU and the Greece Solidarity Campaign are planning activities to build support for those fighting austerity in Greece in the UK trade union movement, including a fringe meeting at the TUC 2013.

As well as continuing to work with the Greece Solidarity Campaign, Unite are continuing with the connections made on the delegation, including inviting women's health campaigner, Sofia Tzitzikou to speak at the Unite health visitors conference in October 2013, and developing direct links between Unite Community branches and Dikaimmoa, and similar community-based organ-

isations in Greece.

Most of all, the delegation highlighted the importance of joint action across Europe for an alternative to austerity, and the Greece Solidarity Campaign is committed to working with others to organise such action.



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