

Feeling a Way to New Modes of Struggle.

Comments from the visit of the Greece Solidarity Delegation to Athens October 2013

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The situation facing teachers and schools in Greece is one of the sharpest in the European Union. Ever since the financial crisis hit Greece, public services and in particular education have been consistently and viciously attacked in an effort to placate the Troika and behind them the bond holders who are making a killing by betting on sovereign states like Greece.

On the website I edit, which is dedicated to bringing teachers together globally to share and learn from one another's struggles, I have followed the campaigns of both teachers and students in Greece against these so-called austerity measures. These have taken the form of demonstrations, school occupations and a long series of strikes. Nonetheless the measures continue unabated as described in the delegation's report, which sets out what we learned when we visited the headquarters of OLME, the secondary teachers' union. The President of OLME has already visited my union's conference, the National Union of Teachers, to share his experiences with teachers in the UK, who are also struggling against a neo-liberal government. It was therefore extremely educative for me to visit Greece and see for myself what is happening there.

While many aspects of the neo-liberal agenda for education, such as standardised testing, performance related pay and privatisation of schools are not so developed as they are in the UK, they are waiting in the wings. And of course the cuts generated by the crisis are much sharper. For most of the decades when I have been an activist in the UK, delivering even a day's strike action has been a major undertaking. Even now, the union is agonising about when and if to hold another national day of strike action. What we are having to face up to however is that a day's strike here and there does not achieve the change we want. In Greece, OLME has been involved both in one day general strikes and in prolonged teachers' strikes, yet the attacks go on relentlessly. Of course that weapon both for us and for the Greek teachers, is an important one, which we must continue to use, not least to energise and radicalise our membership and to get our message across to the public.

However what I found most inspiring and exciting about my experience in Athens, was that the union is beginning to feel its way towards new modes of struggle. What we in the NUT learned from the Chicago teachers' struggle last year was the absolute centrality of embedding the union's work in the local communities which its members serve. In Greece this is being taken to a new level. Both local officers of OLME and other teachers are deeply involved in the solidarity organisations which are proliferating throughout Greece and which are also described in the report. For teachers, this means for example giving extra tuition to pupils who otherwise would not be able to afford it. (In Greece it is virtually impossible to pass the exams needed to get into higher education without such extra private tuition.).

But these solidarity groups are doing much more than helping those with low or no incomes, the unemployed, many immigrants and homeless people to survive, important though that is. They are also campaigning organisations which are fighting for an end to the austerity imposed by the banks and for the return of the common goods and services – education, health, social security and so on – to the people.

It strikes me that this is a real contribution to the development of social movement unionism, which

in my opinion is vital if unions like my own are to break out of their industrial silos and start to fight for the real changes in the structure of society, which we need if we are ever to solve the problem of global, national and local inequality. I have asked the research department of OLME to write an article about this development, in the hope that unions in the rest of the world will be able to learn from them and further develop this work.

I am very grateful to the Greece Solidarity Campaign for inviting me to take part in the delegation, which was inspiring and educative in equal measure

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