

Report of the GSC Delegation to Greece 27-30 October 2013, Bob Archer and Mike Davis

The delegation consisted of: Tony Simpson (Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation), Simon Renton (President UCU), Mary Compton (Former President, NUT), Cllr Isidoros Diakides, Mike Davis (Editor, *Chartist*), James Youd (Treasurer, GSC), Bob Archer (co-ordinator.)

Sunday 27 October evening: The delegation met with Themis Kotsifakis and Eleni Zografaki of OLME (national secondary teachers' union).

Monday 28 October: **Ochi Day**

Not only was this a significant national holiday, but the area around our hotel on Amalias Avenue including access to the Parliament Building and Syntagma Square were the scene of a ceremonial march by **school students** to mark "Ochi" Day (the day Greece said "no" to German occupation) and were completely blocked by a police cordon. Nevertheless Pavlos Charamis (President of OLME Centre for Research) led a group of delegates through police lines to join a **demonstration of University staff** on the other side of the cordon and Simon Renton was able to address them and bring a message of solidarity from UCU.

Meanwhile Panos Trigazis of Syriza's Foreign Policy Department and a group of peace activists (Nani Politou, vice president of the Energy Workers' trade union and leading member of Greek Citizens Against Racism, Maria Atvaniti Sotitopoulou, President of the Greek International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and peace campaigner Judy Giannakopoulou) met with the other delegates at the hotel.

Panos emphasised that the **struggle against neo-liberal policies is linked to the struggle for peace and against fascism and xenophobia**. There was considerable discussion around this point. Panos reported that Golden Dawn recruit actively in the schools and that rescinding the Memorandums which tie Greece to crippling austerity measures would be a vital step towards peace.

He pointed out that there are many flashpoints in the Middle East, saying that SYRIZA supports the Geneva peace process in relation to Syria because it favours peaceful solutions to international problems based on dialogue. He explained SYRIZA is for a just settlement in Palestine based on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

Tony made a number of comments about the peace movement and current international developments. With the other members of the delegation returned a broad discussion followed. Among other things we were asked about the possibilities of developing educational work against racism and xenophobia in schools. Maria highlighted a problem with some Greek doctors attached to the army who want to limit blood transfusions only to Greek citizens. Mary proposed that UK unions should send messages of support and solidarity to Greek trade unions involved in the forthcoming General Strike and reported on the progress of the "Teachers Solidarity" website <http://www.teachersolidarity.com/list/GR>

The Pharmacy of Solidarity at Patisia. The delegation visited the Grava school complex in Patisia where volunteers have re-opened medical facilities closed by austerity cuts. To quote from their handout:

“The Pharmacy of Solidarity at Patisia welcomes and serves for free any homeless or jobless person or any person without social insurance but who carries a medical prescription”.

The pharmacy has access to doctors who furnish prescriptions if required. The Solidarity Pharmacy collects medicines and is open to patients all day on Mondays and Wednesdays and Thursday mornings.

The teachers and parents we met talked about the plan for teachers to provide free coaching for pupils in order to strengthen solidarity within the community.

It is impossible to convey in a few words the atmosphere of our discussion with volunteers, parents and teachers in this setting. Voula Arnaoutaki made a presentation about the work of the Pharmacy and there was a very wide-ranging discussion involving most of the Greek people in the room and all the Delegation members. **The political maturity and self-confidence of all the Greeks of whatever social background, age or gender was truly inspiring considering the catastrophe they are undergoing. This is a genuinely powerful community initiative which is most impressive and deserves fuller reporting.**

Significantly, while they are stepping in where the state has backed out of its responsibilities, they firmly deny that they are working as charities; they insist that they are building a movement to force the state to resume doing what it should do for the people. We must add that despite everything the Greek hosts are going through, we were met with humbling kindness and hospitality.

Teachers’ union OLME: In the evening the delegation visited the **teachers’ union OLME** headquarters and met some of its key figures. The OLME group included National President Themis Kotsifakis, Director of Research Pavlos Charamis, General Secretary Nikolaou Stamatis and the union’s national Vice-President, together with Eleni Zografaki. There was a very wide-ranging discussion based on Mary Compton’s question: “Since we all face the same battles, how can we work together?” Contributions dealt with:

The effects of financial cuts on education:

- 90% of supply teachers sacked
- 2,500 teachers in vocational establishments suspended
- in certain subjects many students do not now have a teacher
- salaries have been reduced (by 45% for new entrants, by 25% at the top of the scale)
- difficulties in pupils even getting to a school rural areas
- tightening discipline and supervision
- plans to use appraisal to suspend teachers (OLME will fight to oppose this, as also performance related pay)
- a trend towards privatising peripheral activities (initiatives helped by EU money!)
- moves toward a national high-stakes testing system and steps towards league tables

- moves towards breaking up national pay and conditions
- the significance of the wide-spread tutoring needed to succeed in the examinations

Mary Compton raised the question of Social Movement Trade Unionism (referring also to the discussion at Grava / Patisia). Tony Simpson (a school governor) raised academy schools. The Greek government appears to be encouraging “failing” schools to seek private business sponsorship. There is a huge pressure to privatise at Higher Education level.

It was also reported that:

- 1200 schools have been closed since 2010 alongside a reduction of 102 vocational schools.
- The number of substitute teachers has been reduced from 20,000 to 10,000
- Pavlos reported that the government has changed the law relating to Lyceums (15-18 year olds) which will now have exams every year (with teacher putting 50% of questions and government other 50%). This was seen as the first step to national exams and the iniquity of comparative league tables
- Further it was reported that the school building service has been privatised.
- A new law is also being introduced to increase teaching hours
- Special needs support has been abolished and the numbers of school librarians cut
- Other external school subject support services have been cut drastically while in-service training has been eliminated
- OLME’s request for one year sabbaticals has been rejected
- There has been mounting strike action against these changes, with particularly strong resistance to changing the public service approach
- Greeks are rethinking party political trade unionism and trade unionism is becoming more political

Tuesday morning:

The secretary of the **public service workers trade union federation ADEDY** - Yorgos Harisis came to meet us at the hotel before setting off for Crete to meet local trade unionists and prepare for the forthcoming general strike.

We then met **SYRIZA MP Theano Fotiou** who gave a report on the party’s work and progress. This included the rapid development of the Solidarity networks across Greece (for which she had lead responsibility). Some of the issues she highlighted included:

- 1.5m now unemployed.
- An auction wave of house selling with 20,000 properties repossessed because of debt. With a tradition of 85% home ownership, the middle class is being destroyed.
- Legal support is provided by Solidarity for All on house and energy issues
- There are free markets, bazaars, medicines and free lessons in supplementary schools.

All of this activity was vital to establish new relationships and new ideas with an active movement as the basis for a future Syriza government.

We then moved to the Parliament building for a **meeting with Manolis Glezos Syriza MP**. Mike Davis asked how Syriza hopes to deal with the situation if and when it wins power. The 92 year old war resistance veteran summarised his view:

- Analyse the reasons for the crisis
- Write off all the Memoranda charges
- Money itself does not generate any value, it merely represents value. Only the worker makes value, so ensure everyone is working to generate more value
- On public finances: impose progressive incomes tax (not a property tax), close down tax evasion, cut waste
- On the banks he urged that the Euro 680 billion bailouts be taken back by the state
- Germany should pay back what it owes from the devastation caused during the Nazi occupation. (He presented each member of the delegation with signed copies of the *The Black Book of Occupation* which provided horrific evidence for the legal case for reparations which was being pursued through the courts and European Union)
- Defence spending needed to be reduced from US levels to the lowest European levels and VAT should be abolished.
- Finally, he wanted internal borrowing or lending to the state – voluntary for those on low incomes but compulsory for the rich.

The GSC delegation were then briefly presented to and received warm applause from the Syriza parliamentary fraction who were gathered for a meeting.

Tuesday afternoon:

National Technical University Athens: We visited the National Technical University Athens on the outskirts of the city, where union representatives of all grades and functions in Higher Education were meeting from across the whole country. Funding cuts have made Higher Education virtually inoperable in Greece, and at that moment administrative staff were on strike and some departments were under student occupation. The meeting in a large lecture hall was to determine what to do next. With term about to start, unless the universities could find some way of functioning, students would miss a whole semester. Simon Renton, President of UCU gave a powerful message of support and solidarity on behalf of UCU in UK.

We were then able to meet a number of young academics who have qualified as university lecturers but have not yet been appointed or paid. They have successfully completed the selection process as lecturers but the authorities have not completed the process of actually appointing them to the job. They have therefore worked for several years without pay. There are 800 of them across the country. Following protest action, the government in August “decided” to properly appoint 400 of them (although they have not yet done so). No new lecturers will be selected until this cohort has been absorbed, so work prospects for doctoral students are poor and there is a constant brain-drain to the UK, Europe and the US. We were told this is even worse than the situation in sub-Saharan Africa, since such people here tend to take alternative employment and lose touch with their subjects. Professors who retire are not replaced. The School of Architecture has seen its establishment reduced from 110 to 60.

Tuesday evening:

Community Assembly of Solidarity in Vironas : The delegation visited the Community Assembly of Solidarity in Vironas (Byron district) www.Vironassolidarity.wordpress.com. We met about 20 volunteers from this **Solidarity Network** in a converted shop on loan from the owner. The ground floor was used for meetings – one of which would follow our visit. The upstairs was packed with donated clothes, toys and foodstuffs which would be distributed to 540 families that in the words of their leaflet “have immediate need for food offering them a package with basic nutrition goods, such as pasta, legumes, olive oil, tomato paste, flour, sugar, milk, etc. every 20 days. In parallel, the network collects clothing and toys for children that are offered monthly for free in exchanging and sharing bazaars.”

The **Assembly** is democratically run, with a council meeting weekly, and includes almost 50% of users of the service. It was established in August 2013. It was reported that because of heavy demand, people in the countryside are sending food direct. Volunteers also make jams and cakes which are sold to assist users, of whom 31% are immigrants. 187 of users have young children and all are on low or no incomes. Fund raising also takes place at cultural evenings where people are also encouraged to bring foodstuffs. This Solidarity Network was claimed to be the biggest in Greece in terms of users.

We heard again that the philosophy was one of “fight for your rights” rather than charity.

Some activists intended to stand in municipal elections and the ex-president of the teacher’s union, now a councillor and supported by Syriza, was also involved in the Assembly council.

To conclude, we are indebted to the many Greek friends who gave up their bank holiday to accommodate discussion with us, particularly Themis, Pavlos and the others at OLME, but also Panos Trigazis and the other peace activists and the volunteers at the Pitisia social clinic. We are also indebted to Christos at Solidarity for All for making most of the arrangements. We were struck by the warmth, hospitality and enthusiasm of all the activists, politicians, trade unionists and volunteers we met.

Additional comments from Mike Davis: ‘We only met Syriza MPs but there was a level of optimism about the prospects for their success in a future election. They also have a refreshing conception of “bottom up” socialism, the notion that an active grassroots movement is needed if a left government is to have any chance of achieving structural and social changes and turning round the austerity programme foisted on the country by the Troika.

There is a strong sense of history apparent in Greek activists: the experience of war-time occupation and the Colonel’s Junta being a ubiquitous backdrop to the conversations, hopes and fears for the future. The boarded up shops, street beggars, the murder of Pavlos Fyssas and other attacks by Golden Dawn on immigrants and leftists, the social clinics all testify to a people undergoing extreme social hardship and political tension. It also reveals a people full of social creativity, militancy and determination. It cannot be sustained indefinitely. Theano

Fotou reminded us of the Syriza slogan “No one to be left alone in crisis” - it captures that solidarity and spirit.’