

## 'THE BIRTHPLACE OF DEMOCRACY NURTURES 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FASCISM.

### LESSONS FROM THE PAST, CALL FOR SOLIDARITY'

#### Reviewing the revival of fascism in Europe. How history repeats itself?

Fascism comes from the Latin word 'fasces' which refers to a bound of sticks representing an absolute authority of the state. Based upon the ideas of militant nationalism, imperialism and racialism, fascism considers the mankind as priori unequal. Nazism, an expansion of fascist ideology, supports the active promotion of the perfect race.

Fascism turns against minorities including immigrants, anarchists, homosexuals, communists and working class organizations. Fascist parties unify people using populist demagogy, reactionary ideas or stereotypes such as xenophobia and religious sectarianism which are lying around in a latent mode and which have the potential to guide public behaviour. Finally, fascism turns against democracy itself, which is already restricted by the free market policies.

The deceitful ideologies of fascism and Nazism prevailed in 1930s, in an era of economic recession in Italy and Germany respectively. In 1919 the Italian Fascist party took advantage of the post-war instability and the public fear that the communism might spread. It started with small military groups and increasingly prevailed. At the stage of fascism's great rise it misled more than ever the masses promising them that they would be benefited by the re-distribution of the wealth. They took finally the power and incrementally moved towards dictatorship with the support of military leaders, businessmen and the ruling class who were those that initially benefited from the new status quo. The destructive consequences of fascism and Nazism were soon massively revealed with the Holocaust being the most tragic among them.

The totalitarian regimes have received a very negative connotation in European history. Fascism in the way it emerged the previous century cannot revive. However, the current financial crisis and the failure of the governments to deal with its political and social consequences are breeding the return of fascism.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism is bred by the need to secure social control of masses from below which cannot be controlled anymore by hegemonic domination. The most striking example is the sudden rise of Golden Dawn in Greece, which has attracted international attention. Golden Dawn is the less camouflaged Fascist party in Europe, openly acting violently against immigrants even in front of the police. Ironically, Greece had lost a substantial part of its population due to Nazi's outburst. In Italy too, the CasaPound movement is increasingly expanding making fascism more popular than ever in the post Second World War history. Tolerance to far-right is observed elsewhere in Europe, including Austria, France and Hungary as well as in USA. In Cyprus the Golden Dawn has ties with the very popular far-right Elam party. In this respect, lessons taken from the fascism in the previous century should not be ignored.

#### The past and the sudden rise of Golden Dawn in Greece

*'The new ruler must determine all the injuries that he will need to inflict. He must inflict them once and for all.'* Niccoló Machiavelli

According to Friedman's theory periods of economic and political crisis provide fertile ground for the privatisation of the public property. In order this to be achieved the shock treatment should be adopted. The shock treatment entails imposition of multiple strains simultaneously so as to minimise the time that the masses have to realise them. Thus, the public becomes more receptive to solutions that would boost the free market economy. The dictatorships that were imposed in Latin America in '70s were a trial of Friedman's economic strategy. Under the historical circumstances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, financial rather than military dictatorships undermine democracy without directly attacking democratic institutions such as the parliaments. In this respect, Greek economic and political crisis could be viewed as second trial of Friedman's strategy.

Golden Dawn's popularity rapidly roused during the period of economic recession and particularly at the time that the technocratic government lead by Papadimos replaced the democratically elected PASOK government. It was imposed as a 'marionette' by the Troika in order to increase political surveillance and control. That period was characterised by severe social and political tension. The Greek society was used to a political system characterised by clientelism and cronyism which fell apart. Consequently, the public trust in democratic institutions declined significantly and the masses entered a psychological state of cognitive dissonance. People who enjoyed an illusion of wealth and luxury lifestyle before the crisis suddenly became neo-poor and found themselves in a vicious circle of debt. Under these circumstances, more and more fertile ground was provided for the far right to rise. The more the financial crisis becomes aggravated the more the Greek society seems willing to tolerate the rise of fascism. Golden Dawn reached its popularity peak when the austerity measures were imposed. In 2010's local elections in Athens it received 5.3% of the vote. In 2012's elections it received 6.9% of the votes gaining 18 MP positions in the parliament.

The history of Golden Dawn goes back to 1980's when it emerged as a neo-Nazi organisation launched by Nikos Michaloliakos, who remains the leader of the party. In 1993 Golden Dawn was registered as a political party, while its popularity was kept very low. Until 2008 the party was absorbed into the Patriotic Alliance, a far-right political party.

Since the rise of the Golden Dawn its representatives have been discarding the neo-Nazi label, supporting instead that they are just nationalists. There is no doubt though that the roots of Golden Dawn's ideology lie in Fascism and neo-Nazism. The emblem of the party is an ancient Greek symbol that bears resemblance to the swastika. Also, the members of the party use the salute that was used by neo-Nazis. Most importantly, there have been publications in the Golden Dawn magazine of praising articles in the memory of Hitler and pictures of Fuhrer.

The members of Golden Dawn pursue the expulsion of immigrants and support the introduction of limits on access to health care in order to induce a Greek health service only for Greeks. It is not uncommon for supporters of the Golden Dawn to become violent towards immigrants and smash their stalls in the market if they fail to provide certificates of selling permission. It should be added that an MP of Golden Dawn, Ilias Kassiaris slapped a female MP of the Communist Party on a live TV emission. During 2012 and 2013 at least 259 attacks against immigrants and ethnic minorities were reported as well as two assassinations of immigrants. Golden Dawn supporters are violent against other minorities

too including anarchists, communists and homosexuals. However, there are rarely prosecuted. In fact some victims are scared to go to the police.

It is not surprising that the Fascist parties use censorship and turn against art, free expression and academy. Golden Dawn forced the stop of the production of 'Corpus Christi', a theatrical play directed by an Albanian born director that presented the Jesus Christ as a gay. The supporters of the party protested and attacked people. Needless to say the police watched without intervening.

The anti-immigrant agenda of Golden Dawn disorientates desperate populations who need an easy target to express their indignation. The public anger is channelled by the Fascist leaders towards scapegoats who are blamed for the unemployment, the economic woes, the rise in criminality in urban centres, the social degradation, the poverty and the failure of the capitalist system. Indeed, Golden Dawn by violently fighting against its targets claims to offer more drastic solutions compared to traditional political parties. Using pseudo-populist speech they talk against the foreign banks and refer to the fact that they were not involved in the political corruption that preceded the current financial crisis. In the eyes of disoriented people Golden Dawn seems to be Greece's spirit for revolution.

It is not uncommon for Golden Dawn members to promise security services to people providing them with lists of telephone numbers to call in case they are in danger of being attacked by immigrants. This anti-immigrant rhetoric is imposed by promises of restoration of the degraded national dignity and by cultivation of an atmosphere of xenophobia. It is also imposed by the cultivation of a mystifying idea of racial and national superiority inspired by the glorious ancient Greek history.

However, the vast majority of Golden Dawn's supporters are not neo-Nazis. Indeed, less than 5% declare that they agree with Golden Dawn's ideology. Most of them are confused people, desperate with the political status quo and the falling of the living standards. Some of them think that voting for Golden Dawn is a way to get revenge on politicians who are responsible for the economic crisis. Others are not well aware of the history or the real ideological background of the party or confuse nationalism with patriotism. Golden Dawn has roused increasingly in areas of Athens that are highly populated by immigrants. This phenomenon stems at least partially from the fact that the governments have failed to deal with the problem of illegal immigration. From a psychological point of view masses with latent violent tendencies have the potential to turn to Golden Dawn.

It is very worrying that the ideology of Golden Dawn is increasingly spreading to the new generation through the social media, youth, athletic, artistic clubs, graffiti in the streets and schools, even music, including songs like 'Speak Greek or die'. In this respect, an attack to an immigrant's shop by teenagers has been reported in the city of Larissa. Needless to say that Golden Dawn offers free lessons of Greek history, which are used as a platform for proselytizing. Some people are attracted to Golden Dawn because they think of it as a fashion. Indeed, some action has been taken so far to combat the spreading of fascism in children and teenagers including the formulation of the anti-fascist front of education. A course in 'political education' has been induced in high schools aiming to promote the idea of democracy and the upbringing of a generation with developed political thought. However, the educational budget has been reduced and thus not much further action can be taken.

What deserves particular attention is the role that the Golden Dawn has played in the Greek financial and political crisis.

#### Greek financial crisis and the rise of fascism: a positive feedback loop?

*"Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable."*

Milton Friedman, 'Capitalism and freedom'

There is no doubt that the failure of globalisation and the consequent social, political and economic instability are inevitably breeding the new fascism.

Indeed, a substantial part of the middle class who are becoming neo-poor are attracted to fascism, as they have been suffering because of the social inequality, the rise in the inflation, the health system disruption, the devaluation of real estate and the reduction of GDP. The middle class in Greece has not only suffered because of the economic recession but also because of the devaluation of the prestige that educated people used to enjoy. It is not uncommon for highly educated people to be unemployed or to have jobs for which they are overqualified. Poverty has increased dramatically. Food hand outs in the streets are the only solution for a substantial part of the population.

Under the conditions of the falling apart of the whole state system people feel betrayed or disillusioned by the traditional political parties and lose trust to the democratic institutions. As the economic crisis deepens unemployment rate which has surged to a record of 27% seems to have a more serious impact on society than the debt crisis. Almost every family is estimated to have an unemployed member.

It is not uncommon for traditional political parties to let the far right grow under their tolerance when other ways to control the working class have failed. It was under similar circumstances that in Italy and Germany the ruling class turned to Mussolini and Hitler in order to prevent a working class revolution. Under conditions of social, political and economic crisis the far right can serve as a barrier that restricts the number of people from the working class that turn to left parties.

Worryingly, Golden Dawn is rising under the tolerance of the government, the police, the justice system, Europe. The ties of Golden Dawn with the police are well known. Golden Dawn has inserted into the police forces. It is also known that Golden Dawn has formed paramilitary units and that the army has contributed to their establishment. It is important to mention that the source of the funds and the financial consultants of the party are kept secret, while it is said that the party receives substantial funds from the economic elite of the Greek society.

The EU which was awarded the Nobel prize for peace seems to turn a blind eye to the sudden resurgence of neo-fascism which has been sparked by the financial gloom. The European Commission, EU leaders and European elites take advantage of the financial debt of Greece in order to protect the interests of the European banks. The most promising way that the financial interests of the banks can be saved is through austerity policies that restrict the public spending while inevitably lead to recession and unemployment. The political

failure to recognise the social consequences of massive unemployment as a cost of the austerity policies nurtures the return of fascism.

The coalition of the parties in power and the media, both of which have dramatically lost popularity following the economic crisis do not hesitate to use the theory of the two extremes referring to the commonalities of the far right and the left to undermine the struggles of the left and those who are against the austerity measures. In this respect, many people are hesitant to participate in the working class struggle by fear of being characterised as extremists.

### The responsibilities of the left

The prevailing of fascism in both Italy and Germany could be attributed to the failure of the left to create a united anti-fascism front. This lesson from the past should be taken seriously into account.

There is no doubt that the failure of the left in Greece to convince people and the lack of consensus between left parties, which appear to be fearful to take responsibility have contributed to the rise of Golden Dawn. Left parties have failed to provide realistic solutions to problems such as the illegal immigration that have been tackled by Golden Dawn violently. They have also considered forming a common alliance against Golden Dawn with conservative parties which are known to have ties with Golden Dawn. In addition, remarkable is the role that pseudo-left schemas have played in the reduction of confidence of the society in the left. Some of these schemas claim to be left while in reality they support the interests of the privileged elites. Thus, they spread confusion to the masses. Even the trade union bureaucracy has responsibilities for the rise of Golden Dawn by preserving the interests of the upper middle class.

### The assassination of left rapper Pavlos Fyssas breeds escalating violence and social tension

On 17 September 2013, Pavlos Fyssas, a 34 years old anti-fascist hip-hop musician was fatally stabbed by George Roupakias, who declared to be a member of the Golden Dawn. The members of Golden Dawn denied him being a member of the party. However, the police found in the home of Roupakias a Golden Dawn membership card.

It is shocking that the victim was encircled by a group of Golden Dawn members arguing with him in front of the police who passively watched the fight. The police did not intervene until the victim fell down stabbed.

Before the assassination of Pavlos Fyssas the party seemed to gain around 12% in polls. However, following the arrest of 22 members of the party including its leader and 5 MPs who were accused of having responsibility for the tragic event and being members of a criminal organization the percentage of Golden Dawn in polls suddenly fell to 1.5%. Thousands of Greeks took to the streets to demonstrate for the assassination of the anti-fascist rapper. Clashes between demonstrators and police took place.

It is noteworthy that the parliament voted in favour of the suspension of state funds provided to Golden Dawn. The trial of the members of the party is still pending while they remain in jail. The party denies that the murderer was a Golden Dawn member. Also, they suggest that the rest of the parties try to take advantage of the tragic murder of Pavlos Fyssas to eliminate a political opponent.

It is true that what happens next will depend on the outcome of this trial. A potential acquittal of the accused Golden Dawn members will possibly strengthen the party and increase its popularity as they might be considered by the public to be victims of the political system. It is noteworthy that some days before the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, 8 members of the Communist Party had been wounded after been attacked by Golden Dawn supporters.

The political instability that worsened by the cold blooded assassination of Pavlos Fyssas was further aggravated by the shot of 3 Golden Dawn supporters in 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2013 outside one of the party's offices in Athens. The murderers got off a motor bike, gunned down the victims from close distance and disappeared. The police failed to identify them. The Greek anti-terrorism force is trying to investigate whether the event was politically motivated and whether it was related to the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. It is apparent that this cycle of violence is signalling the resurgence of terrorism which is another symptom of the economic and political crisis and the social unrest.

### Should Golden Dawn be banned?

Following the cold blooded assassination of Pavlos Fyssas a political debate started about banning the Golden Dawn under emergency legislation. It is suggested that the party should be considered a criminal gang. The effectiveness of such a measure has been questioned as it could lead to the re-appearance of the same party under a different name. Even more worryingly, this could increase the popularity of the party. Its members might be considered to be anti-systemic victims of the political status quo. In this respect, it should be taken into account that Golden Dawn's popularity suddenly increased following the loss of power of the far-right party LAOS due to its involvement in the 2011 technocratic government lead by Papadimos.

Despite the fact that Golden Dawn is inspired by the fascist ideology it shouldn't be ignored that the party entered the Greek parliament through democratic processes. Thus, banning the party would be disrespectful and anti-democratic towards the half million people who voted for it. Also, the coalition might take advantage of the banning of Golden Dawn to attack the struggles of the working class and left parties.

### Call for solidarity and action

As the Fascist parties misuse traditional democratic ways to take the power and then turn against democracy itself, fascism is difficult to be combated. Alliance formed by European left parties could provide an antidote to the rise of the far-right.

Europe can no longer ignore the huge social and political consequences of the austerity measures. The Golden Dawn is currently the third most popular political party in polls. The spread of fascism in Europe is a real danger.

In fact, the greatest revolutions throughout history have been sparked by mass mobilization rather than by the political parties. Degradation of the prestige of politicians and loss of public confidence in government has reached its 'peak'. The necessity of campaigns, trade unions, anti-fascist movements is vital more than ever. Fascism cannot be confronted unless the conditions that breed it are eliminated which are no other than the failure of globalization and capitalism.

The non-precedent rise of the Golden Dawn can be combated through independent working class defending organisations and committees aiming to mobilise people against the system that bred the party and that takes advantage of it to undermine the struggles of the working class.

*Article by Eleni Katsouni*