

## *DISPATCHES*

### **Reflections on the Greek Uprising**

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The murder of a 15-year-old boy in Athens last December led to arguably the most significant social explosion/revolt in Greece in the last 35 years. The most visible aspect of this crisis—at least to people outside Greece—were the clashes in the streets between students, youth, and anarchist activists, on one side, and the riot police, assisted by the occasional neo-fascist vigilante, on the other. In the first days and nights of the revolt, extensive property destruction took place, with protesters breaking and burning banks and upscale stores in cities around the country.

The spectacular nature of these actions earned them a disproportionate amount of attention by electronic media, which thrive on images of chaos and thus, predictably, issued ominous pronouncements regarding threats to “law and order.” These actions were, however, only a small part of a much more wide-ranging protest movement that included Greeks from all walks of life as well as immigrants. This movement adopted a variety of tactics, including large, peaceful demonstrations as well as occupations of high schools, university buildings, municipal buildings, and trade union offices.

As many commentators have pointed out, the shooting of the 15-year-old boy was merely the trigger that released the rage that had been accumulating within people as a result of the chronic social and economic crisis facing the country since the onset of neoliberalism twenty-five years ago. The wave of protest that simultaneously engulfed cities across the country was a reflection of the bankruptcy and delegitimation of a Greek economic and political elite that is notorious for its incompetence and corruption.

While the corruption and delegitimation of the Greek economic and political elites are partly due to the specificities of Greek society and Greek political history, it is a mistake—one committed by more than a few commentators—to attribute the explosion to the inability of Greek society to complete its modernization process and catch up with the practices of the affluent Northern and Western European countries that form the core of the European Union.

Interestingly, this mistake has not been committed by prominent members of the world’s political and economic elite, who recognize that social revolts like the one in Greece could erupt elsewhere. Thus, for example, the Director of the IMF, Dominique Strauss Kahn, has expressed concern that as the world economic crisis deepens, unrest like that in Greece could spread to other parts of the world. Meanwhile, the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, pulled back unpopular education reforms because in the immediate aftermath of the Greek events, he feared the possibility of a European May ‘68-type explosion.

The fears of these members of the world’s political and economic elite point to an implicit recognition that the conditions underlying the discontent and rage of Greeks in general and Greek youth in particular are not unique to Greece. These conditions include the bankruptcy of neoliberalism and capitalist globalization, with all the poverty, inequality, social insecurity, marginalization, and state repression that these have entailed.

In the case of Greece, the neoliberal restructuring took place under the guise of fulfilling the conditions for participation in the European monetary union. Mirroring the conservative, business-friendly cast of the European Union, these conditions have zeroed in on low inflation rates and deficits, despite the cost of chronically high unemployment. Beyond that, the high unemployment rates, especially for young people, have been used as a pretext for introducing more “flexible” labor relations that undercut the historic gains of European workers, even as they increase profits and strengthen the hold of capital over workers. Sarkozy’s nervousness in this respect is understandable, since the attempt of French conservatives to advance the project of reducing young workers into a chronically precarious labor force sparked one of the largest waves of protest to engulf France in recent years.

In this context, young people in Greece (like their counterparts in other parts of Europe) are faced with the prospect of being the first generation in recent history not to enjoy a higher standard of living than their parents. This malaise and despair, this sense of living in a society that systematically kills their dreams (when it doesn’t kill them in the literal sense of the word) was a constant theme among the young protesters. Awareness of the injustices of Greek capitalism is highlighted by the following slogan, which was written on a wall in Athens and alluded to the massive 28 billion euro (roughly US\$40 billion) package that the Greek government passed to shore up the banks: “Billions for the banks, bullets for the young.”

The discontent of young people is also fueled by the sorry condition of the Greek education system. This condition is partly due to the fact that Greece spends less on education as a proportion of its GDP than almost every other country in the European Union. Moreover, Greek families are faced with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they spend lots of money to prepare their children for the university entrance exams. On the other hand, the college degree that those lucky enough to pass the exams receive is usually a ticket to unemployment or to the minimally paid jobs that have led to the description of young people today as the “700 euro generation” (700 euros, or about US\$1,000, is the minimum monthly salary in Greece).

Last but not least, the connection between the neoliberal project and the woes of the Greek educational system were highlighted two years ago by the Conservative government’s attempt to amend the Greek constitution to allow the establishment and recognition of private universities. Illustrating the general acceptance of the neoliberal project by the Socialist Party, the leadership of the party was originally in favor of this change. It was only under pressure from a massive movement that included students, teachers, labor, the Greek Left, and rank-and-file supporters of the Socialist party that the leadership of the Socialist party had to reverse course, thus denying Conservatives the number of votes that they needed in Parliament to pass the amendment.

Though police violence may have been just the spark that got the Greek uprising started, it has also been a long-standing and important issue in Greece. The police have played a repressive role in Greek society at least since the days of the Greek civil war after World War II. The end of the civil war in 1949 found the Left defeated, the Communist Party outlawed, and the supporters of the Left facing decades of persecution, imprisonment, and torture. Along with the army, in 1973 the police were used to brutally repress a student uprising against the American-backed military government that was ruling Greece at the time.

While political life was normalized after the end of the military dictatorship in 1974, the use of the police to repress political protest continued. In addition, police officers have in recent years killed members of minority groups, such as the Roma, and tortured immigrants. In recent months a number of immigrants died after running to escape police officers who attacked them while they were waiting to apply for asylum.

Moreover, as I am writing these words in the middle of January 2009, it seems clear that the government has decided to step up the repression of political protest. In the first major demonstration after the holiday break, the police attacked and arbitrarily detained large numbers of peaceful protestors after the demonstration ended. Among the detainees were volunteer legal aid lawyers and journalists, who witnessed the conduct of the police. It is clear to many observers that the goal of the government is to intimidate people so that they do not take to the streets in the numbers nor with the intensity that they did in December. The job of the government, in this respect, has been made easier by the shooting of a police officer in the Exarchia neighborhood where the 15-year-old was originally shot. This action was condemned by both the Greek parliamentary and extraparliamentary Left, including the anarchists who have traditionally used Exarchia as a meeting place.

A number of events since the murder of the 15-year-old boy have broadened the orientation of the movement. First of all, in late December there was an attempt to kill an immigrant woman from Bulgaria, who was the secretary of the janitorial workers union in Athens and its environs. This attempted murder highlighted the brutal social regression that neoliberalism represents. The janitors in this union work for private contractors even though they clean the offices of public agencies. This recent trend has made workers, many of whom are not Greek, vulnerable to extreme exploitation and rampant labor law violations. Solidarity actions in support of the labor leader from Bulgaria became an integral part of the movement and highlighted the symmetry between violence by the state and violence by capitalist bosses. As one slogan written on a wall in Athens put it: "The state kills the young, the bosses kill workers."

Secondly, the instances of police violence that led to the death of the immigrant workers mentioned above gave the uprising an anti-racist dimension, while, the brutality of the Israeli operations in Gaza, which were taking place at the same time, inspired solidarity and infused the movement with an anti-imperialist dimension.

As I write these words, the movement is still active, but it is likely that its intensity will ebb in coming weeks and months. That said, social struggles may be reignited and intensify, since Greece is only now starting to feel the impact of the global economic crisis. In this context, it is important to ponder the prospects for a viable radical project in Greece and beyond.

One of the principles animating the movement in general and the occupations in particular is that of self-organization and self-management. In a context where political and economic elites have been thoroughly discredited, many young people are clearly feeling the need for free spaces in the midst of an oppressive and alienating urban environment. This is a need for communication, solidarity, and for genuine participation in the decisions that affect one's life. As one of the slogans written on a wall in Athens put it: "We live as long as we change the world. As long as others change it, we die."

It is clear that the creation and survival of such oases of self-management in the midst of an urban landscape ruled by the alienating logic of capital is essential if people are to cultivate their skills and taste for self-management. It is also important, however, that these experiments with self-management do not stay within the limits of a “post-modern politics” of perpetual resistance that self-consciously gives up on the possibility and desirability of fundamental change aimed at constructing an alternative social system.

It appears that both views of radical politics—that of radical politics as “permanent resistance” and that of radical politics as seeking to replace the rule of capital with an alternative, more participatory, and democratic socio-economic system—are present within the movement. The Greek Left can make a contribution to the project of building an alternative system if it adopts a program of changes that point in the direction of economic democratization while opening up opportunities for citizens to develop their skills and taste for self-management.

Right now, however, the two main parties to the left of the Socialists are bitterly split, especially after the Communist Party accused the other party, the Coalition of the Radical Left, for being too soft on those who adopted violent tactics, such as damaging and burning banks and stores. If the parties of the Left do not rise to the occasion, the energy of the movement may well dissipate, the alienation of young people from politics is likely to increase, and the view of radical politics as permanent resistance may predominate over the view of radical politics as a project of overthrowing the rule of capital in favor of a society capable of serving human need and preventing ecological catastrophe.