

Greece's Evolving Social Crisis: “Black Shirt Fascists” in the Greek Islands

Golden Dawn Comes to Samos Island

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Sunday October 7 was a day of mixed emotions. First there was coming to terms with seeing black shirted fascists marching along the water front in Samos Town. When I first came here in 1995 I could never ever imagined such an event taking place on Samos. On Sunday it happened.

But, there was also relief that the Golden Dawn (GD) presence was so small. I counted 35 in their ranks, of whom half appeared to be from outside Samos – they were the ones getting them sorted out in ranks of 3 in the car park before they marched, and leading the chants. The others may have been from Samos but none were recognized by those we were with although later I was told by a close friend who lives and works in the town that she recognized 3 police men from Samos amongst the GD marchers. I think there were 3 or 4 women whilst the rest were men mostly in their late 20s and 30s dressed in jeans and black T shirts. Most of them seemed to carry a flag – lots of Greek and some Golden Dawn flags – which I supposed helped disguise their small turn out.



GD called for the demonstration and had publicly invited all Greek Samians to protest against the re-opening and refurbishing of the Detention Centre that had only been built around 8 years ago but had been closed for some years as the flow of the refugees moved to the land border to the north between Greece and Turkey and away from islands such as Samos, Lesbos and Chios. But as that land border has been hardened into a death trap for those who dare, so the older routes to Samos have re-opened. By the end of September the cells across a number of police stations on the island were shamefully crammed with up to 9 adults living in rooms of less than 15 sq metres. Many of these recently arrived refugees included significant numbers of young children. In the middle of September I went with a friend to take some food and drink to 8 Algerian refugees locked up in Karlovassi police station and being kept inside a single room 24/7 at a time when daytime temperatures were still very high. It was little wonder that the senior police officer we encountered was embarrassed. It was in response to this crisis that the government announced funding to re-open the Samos centre and similar places on other ‘entry point’ islands.

But Samos must represent much more to GD other than just being the site of a detention centre. It is as well known in Greece for its historic left wing traditions. To call for a demonstration on this island is a statement of clear intent that the GD fears no one and no place and will take every opportunity to demand the most barbaric and inhumane treatment of refugees. It seems even the minimalist warehousing detention facilities being proposed which make no attempt to meet the medical, social, financial and psychological needs of refugees are too good for 'these' people as far as GD is concerned. It is important to note that for many protesting the presence of GD on the island their participation on Sunday was in no way an expression of support for Detention Centres, refurbished or otherwise.

So back to Sunday. The GD mustered in a car park at one end of the water front and marched down the road to the other end by the Customs Building and then back again. Each time pausing opposite the central square where we, the counter demonstration, had gathered. They didn't linger long given that their voices were overwhelmed by the chants of the opposition. Once back in the car park they dispersed. The whole thing couldn't have lasted more than an hour. For a première performance on Samos it was not at all impressive.

I am not good with numbers but we the anti-fascists far out numbered the GD presence. None of the main left parties were present formally and most of those present were university students with a fair number like us who were not Greek but lived on the island. A group of Samian women originally from Germany had made a banner and produced leaflets in Greek and English setting out their opposition to Fascism and Racism. They made a great impression.

Being a fine sunny day the centre of Samos town was busy and the cafes around the central platia were selling plenty of coffees. Maybe it was related to the absence of the left parties, but the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly with some great music over the PA boosted by a delight (and relief) that we so out numbered the tiny GD contingent. But it was difficult to discern the general public opinion as the Golden Dawn march passed by. There was little or no reaction - calling out and the like - it was more like looking at people watching some theatre from a distance.

That the response was so muted giving no sense of any sympathy for the GD presence was a relief. But then again there was disappointingly no overt negative reaction to the marchers from the people standing outside the cafes and on the street. I expected to see more signs of distaste and disgust from the crowds as the GD marched past. This can never be a matter of neutrality or disinterest. A friend who runs a shop in Samos town knows of many shop keepers who are more than sympathetic to GD and who, she said, turned out to look at them from the cafes but would never dream of joining them on the march in fear of what might happen to their businesses. It would be naive not to think that there were not many others who are drawn to GD who took a similar position on Sunday.

The turn out by the anti-fascists was just enough. This gives some hope. But fascists' marching in Samos is shocking and a shock. Will they come again? As long as Samos remains a point of entry into Greece and Europe for refugees, I have little doubt that this will not be the last time that GD will come to Samos .

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