

Living with Austerity: Depression Hangs over Greek Islands' Economy

Living with Austerity on Samos Island

By [Chris Jones](#)

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Those of you who have been following my austerity diaries over the past year will know that I have recently emphasized the pall of depression that hangs over the island as austerity and economic disaster take their toll on the well being of the people here.

The consequent stress, anxiety, and sheer shock of watching your life chances and well being dissolve as jobs evaporate, incomes shrink or disappear, and prices of everyday essentials remorselessly rise along with new punitive and regressive taxes have been painful to record.

Anyone with any shred of humanity, even if they still have a reasonable income such as myself, can never escape from the hurt and distress that is all around them. All of my friends and neighbours are facing difficulties and hardship. It is literally heart breaking to see this human catastrophe unfolding before your eyes: to see families split and smashed as more and more of the younger and middle aged men in particular, leave their homes and families in search of work and income. In the past month I have seen at least four men depart for the Congo (to work on the building of a new airport there) and there is much talk now of the opportunities for work in southern Africa as people realize that the traditional destinations for migrating Greeks in Europe and the USA can not be relied upon to provide much needed waged work.

Increasing numbers of small businesses which managed to withstand 5 years of economic decline are now failing with increasing rapidity. Stelios, an accountant who lives in Ambelos, told me last weekend that in the past month alone he has been wrapping up the affairs of 9 companies (out of his portfolio of 160 businesses) and he expects this number to accelerate over the coming months. And it is no better in the public sector where the latest 'deal' with the troika spells the end for thousands of teachers, doctors and municipal workers. Giannis, a qualified teacher with 3 degrees (!) told me yesterday that he has absolutely no hope of finding a teaching job now, especially as the government is committed to closing small village schools and moving the children into schools in the main towns of the island.

Just how are these children going to get to these schools on an island with virtually no public transport system and with petrol costs so high that their parents have no chance to meet the daily costs of transport? The social consequences of such a policy are not even on the agenda of the state. For the teachers 'fortunate' enough to hold on to their jobs, the government has not only slashed their wages (a starting salary for a new teacher is now around 600 euros a month) but is arguing that they should be expected to work in the schools for 40 hours a week with no allowance made for class preparation, marking and so

forth.

The misery, at least on Samos, has been compounded by the absence of the kinds of resistance and solidarities of survival that have been evident and emerging in the main cities such as Athens , Thessaloniki and Patras. Instead so much of the despair and anger felt on Samos has remained locked inside individual families and households which as the sociologist Panagiotis Sotiris observed can feed social cannibalism and the rise of the fascist Golden Dawn party. This is what he wrote:

“It is well known that fascist movements are always fuelled by despair and insecurity, especially individualized despair. Unless broad segments of society regain some form of collective confidence in the ability to change their lives, through struggle, collective fight and solidarity, one can expect the continuous rise of fascists. The simple promise of a Left government cannot lead to such a collective confidence. If we cannot show that collective struggle can make sure that no household will be without electricity, no person without some access to medical care, no child without school lunch, if we do not manage to actually resist aspects of the austerity measures, if we do not show that solidarity between Greek and immigrant workers is the best way to make neighborhoods safer, then the appeal of the Golden Dawn, with all its over-publicized acts of “solidarity only for Greeks,” will continue to rise. Golden Dawn is trying to build the forms of its own reactionary hegemony in segments of the subaltern classes; the Left has not the luxury of simply waiting for governmental power as a “ripe fruit.”

(‘The Greek Left and the Rise of the Neo-Fascist Golden Dawn’
<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/731.php#continue>)

This is just one segment from his article which I cannot recommend highly enough. So much of what he says resonates so strongly with my own experiences on Samos .

A new beginning

As 2012 comes to an end however we are, at last, beginning to see the kind of collective actions emerging on the island which many of us dreamt about but wondered if or when they would emerge. Although many of these initiatives are at their very earliest stages their impact for many of us has been electrifying and energizing. We have a new spring to our steps.

I have to take care not to let my own sense of optimism exaggerate what is happening. After all, as I said above the overall context of austerity remains dire and continues to wreak havoc on the lives of many here, and there is plenty of evidence which points to a Greek state which is growing ever more authoritarian and vicious in its response to popular resistance.

So what is happening? We are now seeing on the island the formation of alternative, collective systems of survival where people are trading not on the basis of cash but on the basis of skills sharing and co-operative working. Local trading systems are now up and running both in Karlovassi and Pythagorio. Friends in the south of the island are now harvesting olives in return for oil and wood. Barter systems are emerging. The owner of one of the biggest hotels in Karlovassi was telling me only the other day that he confidently expected to see such activities become increasingly common place on the island as people traded their garden surpluses (chickens, vegetables, etc) for goods

and services they could not otherwise secure as they had no cash. Then there is the group of women who are beginning to create a network of artisanal food producers (makers of marmalades, wines, oil, honey and other bee products etc) with a view to both island consumption as well as further afield. These women are well aware of the natural treasures of the island and how we can both develop and sustain them to contribute to a sustainable future not based on plunder and exploitation. Samos produces for example honey which has been assessed in Holland as being of the highest possible quality. There is a growing awareness that there are many outside Greece who motivated by solidarity are wanting such products. Furthermore these kinds of activities are forging new relationships between people which are not based on family and kinship networks and which militate against the kind of individualized despair which is such a problem here.

Then there have been more explicit political developments which are breaking from the crushing shackles of left sectarianism which has so blighted Greece since the Civil War. In Samos this is best illustrated by the Anti Fascist/Racist group led by students from the University of the Aegean in Karlovassi. Formed in the Autumn, initially to protest against the march of Golden Dawn through the streets of Samos town, it has subsequently organized a march and meeting to mark the uprising of Athens Polytechnic on November 17th 1973 which was so significant in the overthrow of the Junta, and has subsequently organized an extraordinarily well-attended event on Palestine as well as a film and discussion evening to commemorate the murder by the police of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos in December 2008. All of these events have been characterised by a new atmosphere of openness, excitement, and indeed joy and laughter that you never found in meetings organized by any of the left parties, and especially the Greek communist party KKE.

These developments ripple well beyond any particular event. It encouraged, for example, a north African friend to spend 2 days working for free to clear the land of a neighbour who admitted to voting and supporting Golden Dawn. Instead of reviling and rejecting him, which Mohammed knew would simply push him deeper into Golden Dawn's embrace this simple act of solidarity was far more effective in changing his friend's view. After all sweating and labouring together, sharing a beer and jokes is far more effective than any political denunciation.

I am feeling more positive than for many months. So are many others. We are not under any illusion that this is no more than a start, but it does feel like the beginning of something promising.

Action and reaction

At the same time the authorities on the island are not standing still either. Last week saw 15 of us attending the court in Samos town to give solidarity to a member of the Human Rights group here who was being prosecuted by the state for "false reporting to the authorities". It really is an extraordinary act of attempted state intimidation for an action which involved the group sending a collective letter to the minister simply enquiring about a particular group of refugees who had landed on the island. The following is taken from the statement issued by the human rights group on the island:

"[Our] letter was communicated to other humanitarian organizations as well as the Police Headquarters of Vathi town in Samos . The authorities not only refused to

answer our questions concerning the treatment of the detained refugees, but they also forwarded our letter to the prosecutor, asking him to press charges against the member of our movement who had sent the letter in question for alleged defamation and false statements.

Subsequently, the Prosecutor ordered a preliminary examination, in the context of which all Board members of the Movement were asked to testify about this jointly drafted document. Even though the allegations of the Hellenic Police against our Movement were proven unsubstantiated, the judicial authorities nonetheless pressed criminal charges against the specific member of our Movement who had sent the document and ordered her referral for trial on 6/12/2012 on grounds of “false reporting to the authorities”.

We ask ourselves a reasonable question: since when does a document addressed to the authorities, in particular a request for clarification which authorities are legally obliged to answer, constitute a “lie”?”

(The full text can be found at, <http://www.reinform.nl/solidarity-to-refugees/>)

Chris Jones. Now living on Samos Island Greece after leaving England 5 years ago. His Samos Diary is published on ZNet: <http://www.zcommunications.org/zspace/Chris%20Jones>. With Michael Lavalette he wrote 'Voices from the West Bank' published by Bookmarks, London , September 2011.

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