

# The political issues posed by the mass protests in Greece

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The World Socialist Web Site solidarizes itself fully with the tens of thousands of students, young people and workers who have taken to the streets of Greek cities in protests, strikes and pitched battles with armed riot police. This mass social struggle, unleashed by the police murder nearly two weeks ago of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos, is a harbinger of revolutionary upheavals to come, not only in Greece but throughout Europe and around the world.

Underlying its sustained and militant character is the response of millions of working people and youth who are seeing their conditions of life destroyed and their futures stolen by the unfolding of the deepest global capitalist crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The events in Greece have provoked shock and dismay in capitals throughout Europe. Governments in London, Paris, Madrid, Rome and Berlin are well aware that deteriorating conditions at schools and universities are not limited to Greece. Nor are low paid jobs, mass unemployment, police brutality and a general lack of a future for young people conditions peculiar to the Hellenic peninsula.

Across Europe and worldwide, the younger generation is confronted with a society in which ruling elites have been able to enrich themselves enormously at the expense of the broad masses of people. Government budgets have been plundered and education and social systems gutted on behalf of a small, immensely wealthy layer which—with the help of corrupt states and parties and armed police—vehemently defends its privileges. Millions of high school and university students are denied meaningful education or a job that guarantees them a future. Instead, they face poverty, war and the militarization of society.

The fact that such problems are not limited to Greece but prevail across the globe poses the need to consider the days of rage in Athens and other Greek cities from a broader political standpoint.

The Greek events make clear that masses of workers and young people are no longer prepared to accept the intolerable conditions created by capitalism. The contempt on the part of youth and students for the clichés and empty promises of a corrupt political caste is entirely justified. The young demonstrators have shown great courage in the face of the brutality of the riot police. Nothing will change without the active, massive and resolute intervention of those affected by the crisis.

What is decisive, however, is the development of a clear political perspective to guide these struggles and the building of a revolutionary leadership prepared to carry to the end the fight for the socialist transformation of society.

The first task is to make a serious political analysis of the situation. As if in a magnifying glass, all the fundamental problems of European society have been exposed in this relatively small country that was the birthplace of civilization on the continent.

The effects of the international financial crisis have dramatically intensified the longstanding economic crisis of Greece. At the end of November, in an article entitled “Greek Ship Owners Taken by Storm,” the German *Handelsblatt* reported that the country’s key industry is sliding into “a deep recession.” Revenues had fallen “drastically.” The newspaper quotes an analyst who declares: “This crisis exceeds anything we have experienced so far.”

Industrial production, which constitutes just 13.5 percent of the country’s gross domestic product, also slumped considerably last year: textile and clothing (-10 percent), metal production (-9.1 percent), consumer electronics (-22.3 percent) and shipbuilding (-18.1 percent) all suffered major declines. Foreign direct investments have fallen from 31.3 billion euros in 2006 to just 4.6 billion last year. The Athens stock market index, ASE General, which started the year at 5,000, has now dropped to under 1,900 points.

Despite a wave of privatisations and cuts in social spending, the country’s indebtedness (94 percent of gross domestic product) is exceeded in the euro zone only by that of Italy. In a parallel development, the indebtedness of private households in the last seven years—since the introduction of the euro and corresponding price inflation—has increased by more than five times, from 16.8 to 93.3 billion euros.

Wages are extremely low, with the average monthly income totalling 789 euros. This is only slightly more than in Poland (785 euros) and substantially less than in Portugal (1,080 euros). Youth unemployment is officially listed at 21.4 percent, and in the European Union is exceeded only by Spain (25 percent).

In the middle of October, the government of Kostas Karamanlis decided to implement a “bank rescue package” of 28 billion euros in order to shield the country’s superrich from heavy losses from financial speculation. This new level of government debt will inevitably lead to a fresh round of budget cuts.

For decades, politics in Greece—the cradle of democracy—has been dominated by two families: the Karamanlis clan and the Papandreou clan. Both have established networks of corruption and nepotism which dominate the state and every important sector of social life.

The present prime minister, Kostas Karamanlis, is the nephew of Konstantin Karamanlis, who set up the conservative *Nea Dimokratia* (New Democracy—ND) in 1974 and served at various points as prime minister and president. The current president, Karolos Papoulias, is a founding member of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and a close friend of Andreas Papandreou, whose son is today the chairman of PASOK.

Like no other party, PASOK has dominated Greek politics since the end of the military junta in 1974. It formed the government from 1981 to 1989 and from 1993 to 2004, and exerted a powerful influence on the country’s trade unions.

In the 1980s, PASOK defended a nationalist economic and political policy, which consisted largely of anti-American and anti-European rhetoric combined with the implementation of limited social reforms. In the 1990s, however, in line with other European social democratic parties, it increasingly adopted a neo-liberal economic model and pushed through drastic

welfare cuts, in compliance with the prescriptions of the European Union.

PASOK's support dwindled because of its neo-liberal policies and increasingly aggressive foreign policy, such as its support for the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia. In 2000, it was only able to secure a narrow victory against the ND in national elections, and in 2004 the right-wing ND government of Kostas Karamanlis was able to take power.

It was in this situation that the Greek Communist Party (KKE) rushed to the assistance of PASOK. The party had remained slavishly loyal to the Moscow bureaucracy until the end of the 1980s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated its break-up. Following a series of splits, a hard core of former Stalinists remain, using their influence in the trade unions to quell the struggles of the working class and divert them back under PASOK's wing.

Characteristically, KKE Chairman Aleka Papariga immediately attacked the recent demonstrations and street battles as "juvenile vigilantism" and denounced the young people involved as "senseless perpetrators of violence." The KKE's central aim is to prevent the youth radicalisation from spreading into the working class.

With the sharp shift to the right by the PASOK and the KKE, other left formations have sought to divert the mass movement of the youth. First there is the so-called "leftist coalition," or SYRIZA, an amalgam of the most diverse radical groupings—including the Greens, pacifists, feminists, radical lefts and self-described socialists.

The heterogeneous composition of the party is matched by its complete lack of programmatic clarity. In last year's election campaign, the coalition stressed the issue of ecology as the lowest common denominator to hold itself together, following bitter internal disputes.

The party leadership has explicitly refused to put forward socialist demands. Instead, it sets its sights on a narrow victory for PASOK, in the hopes that it would then have to strike some sort of alliance with SYRIZA. It is no coincidence that the chairman of the German Left Party, Lothar Bisky, appeared as guest speaker at SYRIZA election meetings. One only has to look at the policies carried out by the Left Party in Berlin to realise that nothing progressive can be expected from such a "leftist coalition."

Also playing a retrograde role in the struggles in Greece are anarchist elements, who hold workers responsible for the right-wing politics of PASOK, the KKE and the trade unions, serving to isolate the youth from the working class as a whole.

The only genuinely progressive orientation for the current movement in Greece is a deliberate turn towards the working class in Greece and throughout Europe. This requires an international socialist program, which bases itself on the political experiences drawn from the major struggles of the international working class and on the lessons of the defeats and tragedies experienced over past decades.

The World Socialist Web Site and the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the *Partie für Soziale Gleichheit* in Germany and the Socialist Equality Party in Great Britain, call for spreading the mass protests and struggles that have erupted in Greece throughout Europe.

This movement must be built upon a perspective for uniting European workers in a common struggle to put an end to the capitalist profit system and socialize the productive forces to

meet human needs. Against the capitalists' European Union, workers must fight for the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe.

Within Greece itself, the decisive task is the building of a revolutionary socialist party of the working class, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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