

Response to the questionnaire for the AS assembly on 'Reclaiming Democracy- Peoples United against the Troika for all'.

Points on effective campaigning and on local struggles against the Troika-imposed austerity measures.

Georgios Daremas, Attac-Hellas.

Short description of the situation

Greece became the 'original experiment' or the initial test case (in April 2010) of imposing harsh austerity policies under the guidance of the Troika. The pretext was the high national public debt and the inability of the state to finance its debt by appealing to international money markets. The Troika appeared as the 'saviour' willing to provide EU/IMF backed up financing in exchange for Greece following an 'internal devaluation' policy, adopting severe state budget cutdowns, increasing indirect and direct taxes without regard to social justice, promoting privatisation of public services across the board, selling off any state assets, deregulating its labour market, annulling national bargaining agreements, reducing drastically the minimum wage, slashing off public investment funds, lowering unilaterally public sector salaries, pensions, welfare subsidies and last but not least forfeiting national sovereignty in the domain of economic governance.

In the name of fiscal discipline and the harnessing of public debt, the austerity policies have led to the collapse of the banking sector (due to an enforced 'haircut' of its bond-based capitalisation) and to its utter dependency on the ECB for re-capitalisation, to the out-of-proportion pro-cyclical intensification of the economic slump (currently exceeding a 20% loss of the GNP with a further decline of 4.5% expected for 2013 without the slightest indication of a recovery in the medium term), to an exorbitant increase of unemployment (it nearly tripled exceeding 27% of the labour force, the highest in Europe, and expected to rise over 30% by year-end, only 15% of the unemployed receive any public benefit), to an effective ruination of the small- and medium sized business sector, to general impoverishment (over 30% is the combined magnitude of people below the poverty threshold and the households suffering from material deprivation while the figure is expected to rise when the austerity effects for the years 2012 and 2013 are factored in), to the near complete demoralisation and liquidation of the political system (three different governments in three years, the interim gvt being an unelected Troika-installed 'technocratic' gvt) that has partly resulted in the abrupt augmentation of an extreme right and neo-fascist current that presents itself as an 'anti-systemic' political force.

Experience of struggles, aims, impediments, prospects

There is a diversity of struggles and mobilisations having taken place in the last three years. The major forms of struggle and resistance are a) strikes b) mass demonstrations and protest initiatives c) mobilisations (of the 'occupy' type of protest) d) civil society resistance initiatives (public lectures, issues-based collection of signatures, dissemination of information and appeals to other European social actors) e) building of solidarity networks f) civil disobedience social movements.

The overall picture is a contradictory one in terms of clarity of purpose and effectiveness. The level of strike activity has increased considerably but its impact is lesser than it should be. The reasons for the reduced significance of strikes are 1) lack of preparation of the rank and file to participate to the strike (impromptu decisions to strike taken by trade-union leaders) 2) disregard of the appropriate political timing 3) lack of solidarity striking 4) lack of coordination among trade-unions themselves and between trade-unionism and social movements 5) minimal efforts to communicate the strike goals to the wider public 6) hostile attitude to strikes by the national mainstream media 7) low reputation of trade-unions due to lack of independence from the dominant political parties (trade-union partitocracy). There is also an attitude of 'passive resistance' in the public sector employees (similar to the Japanese 'white strike' form of protest) where minimum work effort is contributed and working by 'the book' practices prevail. The reason is the severe and abrupt reduction of public sector wages and salaries across the board irrespective of the wage level received. The adverse effect of this 'resistance' is that it breeds discontent among the wide public and pits it against the public employees' stratum as a whole.

Large-scale demonstrations when decided in concert by the public and private sector trade-unions and endorsed by oppositional parties succeed to mobilise great numbers of protesters, to sensitise public opinion and to exert a concerted pressure on crucial parliamentary votes over legislating major aspects of the memoranda agreements. When demonstrating groups are isolated pursuing narrow goals they mobilise few persons, they are perceived publicly as a nuisance and they are presented by media as self-interested corporatist cliques.

A spontaneous mass movement of indignant citizens who occupied central public spaces (especially Syntagma square) for months in a row, had developed during 2010-11. It suffered the usual ebb and flow of mass movements which are unable to translate their spontaneous protest dynamic into solid organisational forms that permit the setting down of explicit objectives, of identifiable targets, and generate a sense of self-identity, with the consequence that it was effectively demobilised. One main reason for its demobilisation was the tactic of escalation of police violence used for crowd control that culminated in an ultimate confrontation where extreme police harshness was exercised over ordinary citizens demanding freedom of speech and their voice to be heard in the public sphere, people inexperienced to being maltreated by the police forces or even of gathering in public places. This strategy of fear-mongering is regularly employed by the government(s) to deny the citizens their basic civil and political rights of assembly, of protest, of voicing grievances, of exercising their freedoms of public speech and expression.

Civil society resistance initiatives have proliferated and they seem to attract growing audiences of concerned citizens. The effective use of the new communication tools (cultural venues, internet, social media, you-tube) has attracted also many youth groups. The main impediments to effectiveness are a) the complete black-out of citizen initiatives by the mass media (no mention, no interviews, no investigative reporting). Only fringe media present some of the initiatives. B) The single issue agenda of the initiatives hinders cooperation across the groups (there is a proprietary sense of safeguarding 'one's own turf') and the generalisation of the agenda in addressing broader publics. C) There is a generation gap formed due to the effective exclusion of those age cohorts who are not adept in the use of the new media technologies (or who cannot afford accessing them). D) The political system is completely cut off from this electronic public sphere. There are no institutional conduits that could transmit the public concerns, the demands, the proposals into the domain of the official decision-making processes.

Solidarity networks and self-help organisations have popped up in many places. They do considerable work in provisioning food for the poor, free medical services, remedial classes, legal support to immigrant communities, direct supplying of agricultural products to consumers eliminating commercial go-betweens. Main impediments are a) the parochial and localised character of the networking activity. There is neither inter-networking nor coordination on the national scale. B) Lack of resources both in terms of financing, of suitable premises, of state support, of waged personnel, of organisational and technical know-how. C) Lack of coordination with the charity network of the Greek Christian Orthodox Church. D) Weak communicability of the solidarity efforts to the public.

Lastly, civil disobedience movements have been formed of the type 'we don't pay' which have campaigned against paying 'illegal' highway tolls run by private companies, against paying fares to the mass public transportation services (on the basis that prices were increased exorbitantly without any public accountability), against paying the 'poll tax' imposed on all private housing and facing termination of electricity provision when not paying it due to its collection via the electricity bills. The government reacted to the upsurge of such activist movements with legislating harsh punitive measures including imprisonment and this has led to the halting of the growth and appeal of such actions. Major impediment is the lack of independent authority agencies where citizens could address their grievances and/or deliberate the logic of the imposition of sudden arbitrary high prices and 'taxes' on public services through non-legislated ministerial decrees.

Attac-Hellas, though a small organisation, has attained recognisability in, at least, the broad Left constituencies. It has campaigned on the following issues. A) On the problematic character of banking oversight agencies (in Ireland, Greece, GB) in Europe and the illegal practices of the European banking sector (Libor and Euribor scandals) in cooperation with the Greek debt auditing committee. B) On EU lobbying, the conflict of interests and the capture of EU law-making by corporate interests. C) On ecological issues especially on the corporate patenting of seeds and genetically modified food. D) On the democratic deficit in the EU. E) To make known to the Greek public the viewpoints, the manifestoes, the social movement appeals of the European Attac network (newspaper articles, translations, public lectures etc.). In view of the dominant media and informational ethnocentrism, Attac-Hellas has consistently brought in a European orientation stressing the cross-national negative impact of the EU neoliberal policy making. F) Public endorsement of various initiatives especially against privatisation of public services (telecommunications, water etc.). The main impediments are a) lack of a 'critical mass' of followers that could permit sustained campaigning especially follow-up activities. B) Dearth of resources both financially and time-wise. C) The widespread ignorance and apathy of the Greek public vis-à-vis the mode of functioning of the EU institutions and its authoritarian and anti-social effects upon European peoples. D) General reasons mentioned above (movement's fragmentation, media censorship, predominance of party identification etc.).

Potential ways to address the challenges and concrete proposals

1) Need to synchronise the promotion and occurrence of 'protest events' across the different countries. Also, in this regard the synchronisation must not reproduce a divide between the countries of the Northern versus the Southern Europe.

2) Obviously, a permanent electronic network must be set up that will represent the 'unity of the diverse movements and initiatives' to assist in cooperative campaigning and solidarity actions.

3) An alternative pro-European attitude (critical of EU but supportive of our common European Enlightenment identity –freedom, equality, fraternity) must be enhanced in order to combat the rising neo-nationalism, right-wing Euroscepticism and the narrow-minded promotion of 'national interests' über alles. Practically, this can be achieved by highlighting the 'democratic deficit' of the current EU and in campaigning to establish an independent, non-profit over-the-air television channel that will represent European civil society (according to the existing EU treaties it is an obligation of the Commission to finance such a project that promotes a common European public space).

4) The effective idea of launching an European referendum campaign must be put on social movements agenda (perhaps on a policy addressing the problem of unemployment across Europe directly, other concrete objectives can be discussed). Collecting signatures for a referendum is not so difficult as it may appear at first view.

5) Due to the prevalent media ethnocentrism in several EU countries there is lack of knowledge about the identical neoliberal policies implemented in each country in different dosages and versions. This EU strategy must become public knowledge and people to understand that they 'share a common fate'. To address this a) cultural exchanges must be intensified (f.ex. panels consisting of speakers from different countries) and to establish fora of 'communicating experiences' (broadcast via internet to various constituencies across Europe) b) the EU institutional mechanics must be exposed for all to see c) an attempt to list all friendly media contacts and journalists in print and audiovisual media must be initiated. This is of paramount importance in view of the media blackout and exclusion that our social movements currently suffer.

6) The upcoming Euro-elections is a strategic political event in our Europe under crisis. Rather than passively watch the prospective lowest ever turnout in EU political history, a potential campaign target could be either to field common candidates, or to endorse candidates who accept our movements' platform or to support pro-social issues on the parties' agendas or pressure them to prioritise social and democratic reforms.

7) In view of the brutal maltreatment of peaceful demonstrators by police forces in Greece, Spain, Portugal (and perhaps elsewhere) where basic liberties of European citizens are denied, we should consider the option of organising a campaign to provide legal support and appeal in concert to the European court of Human Rights to protect citizens' rights of peaceful assembly and demonstration.