

England local government and trade union delegation: Solidarity from Tower Hamlets to Greece

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Liam Mc Quade of the East London Teachers' Association reports on the first local government and trade union delegation from England to visit Athens since the election of Syriza, the anti-austerity party, to office in Greece.

Accompanying deputy mayor of Tower Hamlets Oli Rahman were three councillors as well as John McLaughlin, UNISON secretary in the borough. The delegation was keen to make links with Greek trade unionists, local government representatives and Syriza parliamentarians as well as some of the self-organised community organisations which have been plugging gaps in the provision of essential services. The support provided by the Greece Solidarity Campaign in setting up meetings and establishing contacts was invaluable.

Our first meeting was with the executive of the National Association of Local Government Unions, a body which represents 70,000 workers in the Greek equivalent of local authorities. Although they have been involved in the resistance to austerity their members have been hit hard. They estimate that in the region of 250,000 public sector jobs have been lost, 70,000 of which were local government workers. For those in work there have been pay cuts and a severe deterioration in their working conditions. Some of the lowest paid workers have seen reductions of up to 60% in their take home salaries. The situation in locally government is unimaginably desperate. Councils have had a 65% cut in funding from central government and services are now being provided on the basis of "good will". However this has nothing in common with charity and exciting new forms of community solidarity have emerged.

The new government is trying to roll back some cuts and get some people their jobs back. The trade unionists we spoke to say that so far the main change is a psychological one. Although many of them are enthusiastic supporters of Syriza they feel that their role is to make sure that the new government delivers on its promises and they are cautiously optimistic that it will. Previously a number of the executive members had been supporters of PASOK, the Greek equivalent of the Labour Party which has gone from being the "natural party of government" to little more than a token presence in parliament.

The main reason for this was PASOK's willingness to acquiesce to the Troika, a committee comprising the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund which offered Greece a second bailout loan worth €130 billion in October 2011 on condition that austerity on a scale never before seen in Europe be imposed on the working people of Greece. One of the Troika's requirements was that the Greek government abolish the right to collective bargaining. Happily this strategy backfired as the vast number of strikes and other forms of joint action became a feature of the lives of millions of Greeks paving the way to the election of the first anti-austerity government in Europe.

In parliament

The next meeting was in the Greek parliament. There we met several members of the governing party and the Syriza MPs had brought along one of their colleagues from the Greens with whom they are collaborating closely. Syriza is proudly a party like no other in office in the world. We were told that its flag is red because they are socialists, green because they are environmentalist and purple because they are feminist. Yet the MPs are keeping their feet on the ground. They know that many voters turned to them because they felt they'd exhausted the other option. Nevertheless, this gave them the mandate to follow a distinctive policy agenda.

They don't really have a choice. Trying to repay the debt to the Troika has created what prime minister Alexis Tsipras describes as a "humanitarian crisis". Unemployment is at 27% rising to a shocking 60% among young people. A whole generation faces having its future destroyed by the demands of the Troika which wants to create a fully casualised pool of cheap labour. Yet the MPs were in no doubt about who should be paying the price. Corruption and tax avoidance were caused big gaps in government revenues and while previous governments had more than tripled the tax burden on working people the very rich only faced an additional 9% hike. By contrast Syriza is putting young people at the heart of its vision. It plans to offer free education and to create meaningful jobs.

Solidarity not charity

Another big element of the debt was the money squandered in an arms race between Greece and Turkey. One third of the Greek public debt is due to money wasted on buying weapons, often from German companies. This waste of money and the culture of bribes which accompanies it is something the new government is determined to tackle.

We asked how delegations like ours can practically help the people of Greece. One of the MPs gave a very succinct answer. Encourage people to spend their holidays there; participate in solidarity event and spread the word about the government is trying to do and, perhaps a rather more challenging request - build a progressive left party like Syriza in Britain.

The last two visits were perhaps the most affecting.

We had a meeting with KEERFA, an anti-racist and anti-fascist movement which included members of the small but significant Bangladeshi community living in Athens. We also met various campaigners including a migrant strawberry picker who was one of hundreds shot at by their manager after having demanded that their wages be paid up to date. This was a throwback to the era of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Except it was happening in 21st century Europe. "Men arrived with guns. They shot a dog that was in the field and said 'go back to work or you're next'. We thought they were bluffing and then they opened fire."

Our final visit was a practical demonstration of the difference between charity and solidarity. An organisation called Solidarity For All helps local groups of residents, trade unionists and anyone who's willing to help provide some sort of safety net. We watched an open air kitchen provide food for dozens of people who don't have the money to cook or eat. It also offers extra school lessons for children, clothes, books and furniture. In some parts of Greece there are pockets of real destitution, yet the inspiring thing is that people are finding strength and support by combining their energy and talents. It was simultaneously heartbreaking and uplifting.

Every trade unionist, pensioner, student and working class person in Europe has to hope that our sisters and brothers in Greece can face down the European Commission, the European Central Bank

and the International Monetary Fund. Their agenda has brought nothing but misery and poverty to hundreds of millions of people across the continent. If Syriza is able to roll back austerity it's a victory for all of us. Solidarity is essential.

Liam Mc Quade, April 18th, 2015

P.S.

* From Left Unity:

<http://leftunity.org/solidarity-from-tower-hamlets-to-greece/>