

Gifts from Greece?

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Prior to Syriza's substantial victory in Greece's General Election of 25 January 2015, the General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress in Britain spelt out some of its wider issues for people across Europe. Later, when the new Greek government had been elected with a strong mandate to reverse austerity, the TUC General Council developed its message of solidarity.

This Sunday, the Greek people go to the polls in what must be one of the most important elections not just for Greece but for Europe as a whole. What is at stake is the future of democratic control of the economy, and the European establishment's love affair with austerity.

Nowhere in Europe has suffered so much from the after-effects of the global financial crisis. The austerity programme imposed on the Greek people by the troika of the IMF, the European Central Bank and the European Commission has seen unemployment rocket to 25% (and more than 50% among young people), the minimum wage and pensions slashed, public services sold off and in some cases – for example, Greece's public service broadcaster – shut down. Many Greek people have been left destitute, homeless and fearing for their futures. Some have left the country or abandoned their hopes of starting a family.

Above all, these changes have undermined democratic control in the country known as the birthplace of democracy – something that has helped the neo-nazi thugs of Golden Dawn grow. Unelected forces from outside the country have dictated the terms on which the Greek government and economy can continue to function. Labour's equivalent in Greece, PASOK, has all but collapsed under the strain. Collective bargaining has been undermined, and the unions' role reduced to fire-fighting, resisting closures, sell-offs and attacks on living standards.

For the rest of us in Europe, the elections are important because they could see the rejection of austerity and renewed

discussion of the sort of sustainable investment plans that the ETUC has advocated. The IMF has – astoundingly, without showing any remorse – accepted that the levels of austerity they helped impose on Greece were based on flawed economic models. Every serious commentator I know acknowledges that, somehow, Greece’s debt needs to be reduced, and that continued austerity in Greece is not the answer. That means some form of rescheduling the debt, including debt forgiveness, must be arranged, and the infamous Memorandum, under which Greek national sovereignty and economic sustainability were removed, needs to be replaced.

The costs of the global economic crisis need to be shared more fairly and, of course, there are problems in Greece that exacerbated the crisis, and are not externally imposed. Public debt was too high before the crisis. But that wasn’t the fault of the people who are now paying for austerity: Greece needs to address the oligarchy that led it down the ruinous path it was already following before the global financial crisis hit, and whose members have so far not had to pay the price.

Although the Greek people have suffered most under austerity, if they reject it that will have repercussions in forthcoming elections across Europe – starting with Spain – because austerity is hitting everyone (arguably, it already hit Germany in the last decade when pay growth stagnated and the sort of low paid jobs we are used to in the UK spread to Europe’s richest economy.) The UK’s working poor and middle classes have also suffered from the ideological craze for slashing the state back to the size it was in the 1930s, the spread of low-productivity and zero hours jobs, and stagnating wages.

Now every poll shows Syriza, the left party headed by Alexis Tsipras, who I met last year, in the lead. Some European politicians have, disgracefully, been threatening the Greek electorate with dire consequences, including expulsion from the Eurozone, if they dare to vote the wrong way! There are powerful forces mobilising against the interests of the Greek people. So if they choose an alternative path on Sunday, they will deserve and need our support and solidarity.

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Solidarity with Greek Workers

Following Syriza’s substantial general election victory on 25 January 2015, the TUC General Council issued this statement.

The TUC General Council, representing 6 million trade unionists in Britain, sends greetings and solidarity to the people and trade unions of

Greece, through our sister organisations ADEDY and GSEE.

Greek workers and their families and communities have suffered terribly in the five years since the financial crisis began, and in particular since the troika – the European Commission, European Central Bank and the IMF – imposed the infamous Memorandum on the Greek people. Austerity and structural reforms have shrunk the economy by a quarter, produced unemployment of over 25% (over 50% for young people) and seen public services slashed or even closed down as is the case with the public service broadcaster ERB. Minimum wages and pensions have been cut, collective bargaining rights and a voice for workers on the economy have been destroyed, and lives have been ruined: even suicide rates have risen dramatically. The TUC expressed its concern and solidarity with Greek workers and their unions in a resolution at Congress in 2013 and we have since worked closely with the Greece Solidarity Campaign – our support for which we reiterate - and our sister organisations in Greece.

These measures have not been confined to Greece – they are part of a global assault on workers and ordinary people which has led to increasing inequality, falling living standards for the majority and any gains from growth going to the already rich and powerful. Across Europe, workers' rights are under attack and living standards have fallen or been frozen. Deflation – in part due to lack of wages-driven demand and in some countries excessive personal debt - is now the biggest risk facing the European economies.

The election of the Syriza-led government in Greece in January has therefore given hope not only to the Greek people but to people across Europe. It has already signalled its commitment to meet union demands big and small, such as restoring the value of minimum wages and pensions, pro-poor social policies, reopening the ERB public service broadcaster, re-employing the striking cleaners at the Finance Ministry and ceasing the privatisation of Piraeus port, as well as giving Greek-born children of migrants citizenship rights. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has gone on record pledging 'to end the medieval regulation of the labour market created by the troika to serve the interests of the oligarchs', meaning the restoration of collective wage bargaining. The TUC welcomes these moves.

We urge the international community – and especially European institutions and governments – to give Greece room to breathe economically. As ETUC General Secretary Bernadette Segol has said: 'Greece's debt burden is unbearable and must be relieved. European Union policies have created a disaster'. In particular, we call on those

governments currently resisting the negotiation of a fair deal on Greek debt to consider the hardship imposed by the Memorandum, and the likely beneficiaries of any further moves to over-ride the democratic will of the Greek people, including the neo-nazis in Golden Dawn who pose a threat to social cohesion and trade unionism.

We urge progressive politicians across the EU to learn the lesson that it is the role of democratically elected governments to protect workers' fundamental human rights and people's living standards from market forces rather than the other way around. And we call on trade unionists in the UK and across Europe to show solidarity with the Greek workers and unions in defending the Greek government's programme of social justice and redistribution, and its programme of genuine structural reform to tackle the power of the oligarchs.

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'Ken Coates was not only a great human rights proponent but also, perhaps less well-known, a determined seeker of historical justice. I know this personally as a biographer of Nikolai Bukharin and close friend of his family members who survived Stalin. In the 1970s, Ken initiated the international campaign for Bukharin's full exoneration and political rehabilitation. When that finally happened in Moscow, in 1988, everyone involved, from Bukharin's family to the Soviet leadership, knew that Ken Coates had played an essential, animating role in the eventual outcome.'

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