

Hell No, We Won't Pay

Uprisings in Greece

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The international press is constantly writing about the economic crisis in Greece. Economic pundits speculate less about whether or not Greece will default but in what manner and when. Absent from these considerations is the massive popular revolt in Greece against the Draconian measures already in place. Totally absent from mainstream commentary is the effect on European stability the mass resistance developing in Greece might have if replicated in other EU nations. The massive marches in Greece have gotten considerable coverage, but far more significant are the unreported successes of the I Won't Pay movement and the communal revolt in Keratea, a small seaside town 25 miles southeast of Athens.

I Won't Pay

The I Won't Pay movement began when residents of the suburbs of Athens decided to stop paying tolls at the national highway. The first action taken by a conscious few was to simply lift toll gate bars and drive through without paying. Toll gate attendants, perhaps in sympathy, responded only by reporting the problem rather than trying to stop anyone. The violators grew in numbers from a few score to hundreds and then to thousands.

Joseph Papadopoulos, a member of the steering committee of the I Won't Pay movement, issued a press release stating that given the wording of Greek law, there is no legal punishment for not paying a toll to the private companies that manage what is a national asset. Legally speaking, the toll dispute is a civil rather than a criminal matter. Moreover, he noted that any tolls charged are supposed to pay for building and maintaining roads. Since the companies are not so doing, the tolls are not legitimate.

He further noted that the costs of building the roads were paid for a long time ago and that excessive tolls violated the Greek constitution which guarantees the public the right to travel. The amount of tolls a daily commuter would have to pay averages \$155 monthly while the top monthly salary for civil servants is under \$1,000.

In January, the movement got a huge emotional boost when Apostolos Gletsos, a popular TV actor who is also mayor of Stylida, a small town 133 miles north of Athens, took a steam shovel and personally bulldozed the toll booth and various parts of the highway guard rails serving his city. Gletsos announced that he was protecting the livelihood of local farmers who had to use the highway for a multitude of daily purposes. His actions were heralded in most of the national press as heroic, his celebrity an added plus in giving the incident wide coverage and boosting the I Won't Pay movement's visibility. In February and March, there were numerous incidents of trade unionists (usually Communists) and anarchists barricading toll booths and lifting the toll gates so motorists could drive through without even getting out of their cars.

In May, the Papandreou government announced that even though it claimed only 10,000 persons were refusing to pay tolls on a regular basis, as a sign of good will and compassion, the government would lower toll rates by

some 50%. What effect this action will have remains to be seen, but the concession has generally strengthened the attraction of other I Won't Pay efforts.

The I Won't Pay movement, for example, has spread to the ticket stations of the Athens subway. On various occasions, Communists and anarchists have taped over the pay slots of toll booths, which meant that thousands of riders could not validate their public transport tickets. The same action has been taken at bus stations and trams. Most transport workers are sympathetic to such actions, but when one bus driver tried to collect tickets, he was forcefully expelled from his bus. Activist Konstantinos Thimianos told the press in March that, "The people have paid already through their taxes, they should be able to travel for free."

A further manifestation of the I Won't Pay Movement is that in one area of Athens, citizens stormed a police station and took back confiscated licenses, burned thousands of traffic summonses, and destroyed all available records. In a less dramatic effort, some physicians in the public health system treat their patients as usual but direct them not to use the machine needed to record their 5 Euro co-pay. A related phenomenon involves reports of people not paying the full amount of their bills at supermarkets. Exactly where this dynamic will next manifest itself is unknowable but the principle of civil disobedience has taken root in the general public.

The Battle of Keratea

Athens has an enormous waste disposal problem. Like all metropolitan areas, it needs landfills to get rid of its waste. When the wealthier suburbs and tourist areas around Athens refused to house such dumps, the federal government decided to create a landfill on a hill abutting the working class town of Keratea. The city promptly voted against being the cesspool of Athens, but its refusal was overridden by the federal government.

Rather than acquiescing to the central government, Keratea's residents rebelled. They set fire to construction vehicles, erected roadblocks on the highway, and even tore up the highway leading into their town. Athens persisted with the project and the Keratea resistance became a full-scale communal revolt.

When riot police, armed, shielded, and helmeted, were sent to tame the city, they were met with a torrent of rocks and Molotov cocktails. Socrates Mangas, a riot police officer told the press, "In twenty years, I've never seen anything like this...Sometimes we are pelted with hundreds of Molotov cocktails in a single shift." He added that one went to work without being sure if he would be coming home that night or be taken to a hospital for third degree burns.

The conservative national press complained that "hooded" anarchists had hijacked the Keratea movement, but even the most hostile commentators admitted the resistance had the support of the mayor who stood on the front-lines, shoulder-to-shoulder with shopkeepers, farmers, schoolteachers, and teenagers, in what was called a "phalanx of defiance."

In May, after months of rioting and mayhem, the Papandreou government offered Keratea a truce. Riot police would be withdrawn, control of the city would remain in the hands of the resistance, and the landfill initiative would be shelved.

Fanning the Flames of Discontent

The massive civil disobedience movement in Greece sees its mandate as international rather than national. Using various means, mostly electronic, they have tried to make their actions and perspectives known throughout Europe in hopes of sparking revolts similar to their own. Greeks noted with pride that some of the May demonstrations in Spain raised as one of its slogans, "We are Greeks." At subsequent daily rallies staged in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greeks expressed their solidarity with Spain by taking the name Los Indignados (the Indignant), which the Spanish had used to describe themselves. The Athenians termed themselves Los Indignados of Constitution Square and the Thessalonikians termed themselves Los Indignados of the White Tower (the city's landmark historical site). The nonviolent Indignados rallies, which often take the form of mass sit-ins, have reached 30,000 and more on specific days. Greek activists, in short, have concluded that for fundamental changes to occur in Greece,

there has to be what some have called a European Spring. A significant aspect of the most recent rallies is that they were organized solely through social networking rather than through trade unions or political parties, which is the norm in Greece.

The degree to which explicit anarchist ideas are embodied in the Greek ferment is not quantifiable, but the anarchist influences, and anarchist ideas, are everywhere. The anarchist role in mass demonstrations is obvious to all, but what may be more significant is the spirit of defiance anarchists represent and their hostility to all the established political parties, including those of the Left. Judging that any Greek government will be hostage to international capital, Greek anarchists repeatedly underscore the necessity of direct action as the only practical discourse that will be heard.

Is anyone in Wisconsin listening?

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