

Collective Action in the Time of Covid-19

Reflections from Greece

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As the Covid-19 epidemic spread through the world at the beginning of 2020, the governments of many countries, including Greece, enacted emergency quarantine and stringent lock-down measures. There was a fear among social activists that collective action would be stifled.

Nonetheless, collective action emerged in Greece, mainly on two fronts. There was a mobilization of health workers against the government's inadequate funding of public health care, as well as grassroots forms of mutual aid. The latter took shape mainly in Athens through two distinct networks.

One was the Group for Information and Mutual Aid Against Covid-19 consisting of people from the anarchist movement in Athens. Anarchist affinity groups based in different squatted or rented social spaces across the city were the point of mutual aid at the local level. The already existing network of anarchist collectives gathered food and medicine, and knowing the people of different neighborhoods they were able to distribute these with precision as to who was in greatest need.

The other main network was Nobody Alone, formed by leftists who received information directly from hospitals on particular cases of people needing help, mostly among the elderly and disabled. Dividing Athens into areas of need, activists distributed medicine and food door to door. Nobody Alone established an online radio station called Radio Quarantine Social that broadcast news relevant to the pandemic. They focused particularly on conditions and deficiencies of the Greek health care system that were not presented by mainstream media and official government reports.

Both mobilizations of workers against state policies and grassroots forms of mutual aid are extremely important irrespective of their size or immediate impact. They demonstrate the capacity to respond to an adverse situation in a way that does not atomize bodies and responsibility.

Collective action during the peak of the pandemic demonstrates it as an essential aspect of a community's existence rather than simply a luxury of good times. By the same token, apart from the concrete gains it achieves or the aid it offers people in need, collective action provides outlets for a discharge of anxiety and depression as well as the development of more positive and political effects. A biopolitical emergency has emerged making the



Music industry workers at a protest in Thessaloniki, Greece

restriction of individual autonomy an occasion for fostering common responsibility and active participation in mutual wellbeing.

However, grassroots mutual aid in Greece has been limited for several reasons.

This is partly related to the comparatively low level of the spread of the virus and the state's capacity to deal with that problem. In addition, grassroots mutual aid, offering an alternative to state administration, acknowledge that their horizontal infrastructures lacked the resources, know-how and institutional means to respond to the challenges of the pandemic beyond the local level. Moreover, they did not have the structures that could enable them to issue effective calls or directions even on the local level.

So far, it is difficult to tell how the global dimension of the pandemic will affect the evolution of conservative policies. This does not imply that no attempts will be made at certain levels, such as in the field of employment and labor market policy where a neoliberal type deregulation is already present.

The spread of COVID-19 also defines a supranational space, suggesting possible shifts in the way collective forms of identification are perceived, both at a national and a global scale. This leaves room for the creation of new collective self-identifications and the production of new collective subjects, thus paving the way for processes of antagonism with hegemonic powers and representations.

The spread of the virus and the dysfunction of our public health systems may lead to certain realizations that could create conditions conducive to the dynamics of a progressive or even radical renewal. Whether we are about to set a new agenda for collective action is a question to be answered in the next few months.

We can already see both the outline and content of claims relating to a double agenda. The first aspect concerns the concept and practical operation of a welfare state. The second associates the wider character of capitalist production and growth with public health.

The idea of "personal responsibility" to prevent the spread of COVID-19, presented in mainstream media, is an attempt to cover up the shortcomings of the public health system. However, this will probably not last long. Through the participation of multiple collective actors, the claims and demands for a welfare state will very likely be placed at the center of public discussions.

This is a key point since the neo-conservative plans in the field of public health are also likely to suffer a severe setback through struggles related to social norms, possibly including collective demands by workers. These may be brought on by the erosion of labor regulations, inherent in the systematic restructuring pursued by modern neoliberal states. However, under the right conditions these two aspects may spur part of a new cycle of protest.

Second, there is evidence that an intense debate is already in progress concerning the ways the dominant economic and productive models not only affect but are intertwined with the natural world, including the microbiological. This debate suggests changes in conceiving the environment in terms of a unity, in particular regarding the relationship between humans and other animals. It is shaped in the light of criticism related to intensive livestock farming, urbanization, and human encroachment on previously untouched habitats expressed by both members of the scientific community and activists. This could enrich a so-far rather weak collective mobilization against climate change.

The conditions that could trigger a new cycle of protest are present. Its possible launch on a vast and perhaps worldwide scale, after the end of the pandemic, would also mark a kind of reflection on our mistakes. Such a development could see the emergence of a new moral code—a normal consequence of a pandemic that in other times has been articulated in theological terms.

This new moral code might be understood either in narrow national terms or in a more international manner. It would interpret the pandemic according to each culture. If the conditions highlighted by the pandemic are critiqued in international terms, it could become an opportunity and a basis for wider transformations.

It should be stressed that in Greece no discussion developed related to social welfare which could compete for hegemony and, thus, be able to effectively challenge the dominant interpretation of the pandemic as a threat to national security.

Overall, a reflective attitude is welcome. As elsewhere, within Greek society, forces of self-organization exist which are vital in view of the recurrent crises and system failures that most probably lie ahead. But such forces are not yet very strong and those involved are still looking for a compass to orient them in the tumultuous years of a future that is already here.

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