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# Greece in Crisis: An Interview with Despina Lalaki

DOUG ENAA GREENE AND DESPINA LALAKI JANUARY 29, 20134

In early January 2013, *Doug Enaa Greene* of the *Boston Occupier* interviewed *Despina Lalaki* on the current situation in Greece. Despina Lalaki is a sociology doctoral candidate at The New School University and Lecturer at the A.S. Onassis Program in Hellenic Studies, New York University; and her writings have appeared on *Al Jazeera*. Lalaki is also involved in raising awareness about the crisis in Greece. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.

Despina Lalaki

**Doug Enaa Greene:** What political organization and/or ideology do you adhere to? How and why did you become politically involved?

**Despina Lalaki:** I support the Left but I have never been a member of a political organization or party. Most recently, however, I have become involved with the Greek-American Left Movement, NY (Aristeri Kinisi) with the objective to raise awareness about the political, social and economic crisis in Greece and in Europe more broadly.

The accelerated process of social and political degradation in Greece is what forced me to engage more directly. Since last February we have organized a series of events and actions in New York City among which a protest at the Zuccotti Park on February 18 for the International Day of Mobilization in support of Greece, a very successful public meeting on October 9 in Astoria, NY against the fascist party Golden Dawn in Greece and in the diaspora and a protest at the Permanent Mission of Greece to the UN on November 14 in solidarity with the workers' general strike in Europe. On January 19, 2013 we are planning a protest at the Greek Consulate in NYC as part of the International Day of Action against Fascism which has been called from Greece.

**DEG:** Why do you think Golden Dawn has gained so much support? What measures do you think are necessary to stop them?

**DL:** Historically when democracies fail, which is followed by disenchantment, political cynicism and disillusionment a vacuum is created that is often filled by extremist ideologies like that offered by groups such as the Golden Dawn, the Neo-Nazi party that is now member of the Greek Parliament. The GD proclaims an anti-systemic position, provided that they have never been part of what they condemn as the corrupt political system and they pose as defenders of principles such as that of national sovereignty, which has come under assault by the governing bodies of the EU. Suffice to say that they have no alternative program in place other than expelling all immigrants from the country, the people that they systematically target and accuse for the rising unemployment in Greece while they often unleash assault squads in the streets of Athens, as well as other cities, in order to attack and terrorize individuals or whole immigrant communities.

One cannot hope for any measures to be taken by the Greek government or the police which most often directly collaborates with the GD. The Nazification of the police at this stage is notorious. Racism is rampant, especially among its lower ranks. We have many examples of cases when they strongly discourage people who have been subjected to attacks from bringing charges against their perpetrators. During antifascist protests they openly protect the DG and they arrest and prosecute the protesters. In October fifteen anti-fascist protesters were arrested in Athens during a clash with GD supporters. Following their arrest they were tortured at the Attica General Police Directorate (GEDA). The incident was extensively documented and the news reached through Guardian, which published an article on the subject on October 9, and other media an international audience.

Any resistance against GD has to come directly from the people. Direct mobilization on community level has in many cases obstructed their plans to open offices in various locations or to further terrorize local communities. Greek workers' organizations increasingly work in collaboration with immigrant groups publicly protesting the presence of GD in neighborhoods and exposing them for their crimes. In the past couple of years at least 800 cases of attacks by GD have been documented. However, nobody has been prosecuted or brought to justice. The political system and the governing parties are directly responsible for the rise of the GD. It is our responsibility therefore not to tolerate GD's attempts to make racism, religious fundamentalism, and homophobia into a rule of life.

**DEG: Why is Golden Dawn opening an office in New York City? How is this connected to the wider situation in Greece?**

**DL:** Golden Dawn does not have an office in New York City! They hold private and secret meetings because they were ousted by the community as soon as it became publicly known that they were active in Astoria, Queens. The Federation of Hellenic Societies of Greater New York, an umbrella organization of more than 150 Greek societies and groups, has publicly denied in an article published in NYTimes on October 19 that they ever offered them space where they could meet or conduct their “For Greeks Only” charity drives. However, the presence of a neo-Nazi group with a racist, anti-immigrant agenda within a community of immigrants, that of NYC and of Astoria, Queens more specifically, is an irony in itself which should command our attention.

The presence of GD in NYC is directly related to the canonization of Nazism in Greece. Since they entered the Parliament after receiving 7% of the public vote and 21 seats in the elections of May, but only 18 in the June elections extremist groups which have always been in place, here in NYC and elsewhere, felt invigorated, they were able to attract more attention and probably new members and to come out into the public domain as groups of a legitimate ideology.

Of course there is a strong ethnic and cultural component in this case. Greek people in the diaspora, who do not engage with the GD out of desperation because of economic pressures and political disillusionment, factors which have led many people in Greece to espouse the GD rhetoric, find in GD an outlet through which they can defend their cultural identity. Living in communities ethnically, racially and linguistically as diverse as that of New York city’s constitutes a great challenge to people who draw their pride from being distinct and insulate from any cultural or racial intermixture. Terms such as “Muslim Greek” or “Black Greek”, for instance, would constitute a direct affront to their cultural imaginary.

**DEG: What has been the response of the Greek community in New York?**

**DL:** The response had been almost immediate after it came to the public’s attention that the GD was planning to open an office in Astoria, Queens. Early in October two different public events were organized in Astoria in protest of the presence of the Neo-Nazi group in the community. On October

5, a protest took place at Athens Square Park and local public officials, among whom Assemblywoman Aravella Simotas, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, District Leader Costas Costantinides, gave a press conference denouncing GD's ideology and demanding that they take their business elsewhere. Representatives of ethnic and religious communities, among whom was Alan Jaffe, president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, also expressed their dismay. A few days later, on October 9, a public meeting attended by more than 200 people was held again in Astoria organized by a number of groups including the Greek-American Left Movement NY (Aristeri Kinisi NY), OccupyAstoriaLIC and Strike Debt.

The media reaction was equally swift. The New York Times, NY Daily News and the local community-based press strongly condemned the presence of GD in New York City. The immediate reaction and mobilization against GD has definitely limited their chances for appealing to a wider audience or for organizing and acting in public.

**DEG: What are your impressions of SYRIZA? Where is it likely to go in the next elections? What obstacles do you believe a potential SYRIZA government would face?**

**DL:** The Coalition of the Radical Left, SYRIZA, has risen out of the economic crisis, the disintegration of the old political system and new forms of popular organization. In the most recent elections in June 2012 SYRIZA polled just under 27% and became the main opposition party facing a governing coalition of ND, which had received merely 2.8% more, Pasok and the Democratic Left. Within the period of a month and despite the heinous propaganda which was unleashed by the mainstream media in Greece and abroad, SYRIZA had managed to increase its share of votes more than 10 points. In the May elections of the same year it had polled over 16%, while in the previous elections of 2009 it had received only 4.6% of the vote. There is a direct co-relation therefore between the unraveling of the economic, social and political crisis in Greece and the rise of SYRIZA.

I would characterize SYRIZA as a "party in progress." It is a coalition party that plays host to various left-wing organizations, ranging from revolutionary socialist to radical reform-oriented and to many unaffiliated individuals still in need of a more clear agenda and political program. While moving towards becoming a more unified political group SYRIZA held its first national conference at the end of November 2012. The fact that two

different streams of views emerged from the conference, the one grouped under the so-called “United Platform” and the other titled the “Left Platform” is rather telling that SYRIZA does not adhere to traditional party politics, at least not yet. The draft proposals that were voted, with the “United Platform” having received the majority of the vote, are rather abstract, however, some very important points of difference were put in place.

The following constitute only the main points of contention between the two streams of thought. The “United Platform” wishes to break with the Europe of neoliberalism and authoritarianism while it sees the fate of Greece as concomitant with the fate of Europe and it calls for a renegotiation of the debt at a European level with the objective to discard a great part of it as illegal. The “United Platform’s” proposal further promises to cancel the memorandum, place the banks under public control, reinforce the welfare state and gradually place the strategic sectors of the economy under public control. It also suggests that its goal is to form a government with the Left at its center, leaving this way the window open to a possible collaborating with the conservative political forces.

The “Left Platform” on the other side adopts a more critical view toward the European Union and while it does not advocate a direct confrontation with a return to the national currency of drachma it maintains that it is imperative for SYRIZA to develop a so-called Plan B and be prepared for a possible exit from the EU. The cancellation of the debt, the immediate stop of payments toward the debt and the establishment of a united left front in close collaboration with KKE and Antarsya, the other left parties, trade unions and community-based movements, a front which will lead to a left government are central points for the “Left Platform.”

SYRIZA has an appointment with the history of the Left in Europe. It has an opportunity to become the leader of the various movements and radical political formations currently taking place in the whole continent by identifying with the Europe of radicalism, as the “United Platform’s” proposal suggested. SYRIZA needs to build direct relations with these movements and trade unions that already put up a fight against the austerity and social degradation imposed by the governing bodies of Europe. It is argued that SYRIZA is increasingly succumbing to pressures to adjust its rhetoric to a more “realistic” direction because otherwise the forces directly related to the interests of capital will stand on SYRIZA’s way to electoral

victory. However, this is precisely the fight that SYRIZA is called to give before or after an electoral victory. If the most recent rhetoric of “realpolitik” is merely a strategic move then I believe it is a wrong one because as the cases of Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela or Argentina suggests, the implementation of more radical policies will not go unchallenged, to say the least, after SYRIZA receives a popular mandate to govern.

The kind of pressures that a SYRIZA government will face is directly related to the kind of party SYRIZA will end up being. If SYRIZA develops a policy of collaboration with the governing European elites, which are deeply invested in neoliberalism and financial capitalism, then SYRIZA will be subjected to great pressures from the bottom and its electoral victory will only be short lived.

**DEG: What are some of the glaring effects or stories resulting from austerity measures that stand out to you?**

**DL:** In a country where house ownership and strong family ties made the phenomenon of homelessness virtually unknown to the Greek society recent counts bring the number of homeless people in Athens alone up to 25,000. In a country that had the lowest suicide rates in Europe and while suicide as a cause of death is often concealed since the Greek Church does not condone it, in the month of June 350 attempts and 50 deaths, again only in Athens, were documented. The words “soup kitchens” was something associated with WWII when Greece had some of the highest mortality rates in Europe. Today, soup kitchens and other community-based initiatives to feed the most poor and destitute constitute a daily occurrence in many parts of the country. In the north of Greece where temperatures are often below zero during the winter the orders for heating oil are 80% down comparing to last year and the high demand for wood has led to a massive increase in illegal logging, especially in the mountainous regions. The most recent counts of unemployment rates suggest a steady increase having reached to 26.80%. The unemployment among the young people is higher than 50% while these numbers say very little about those employed but have lost half if not more of their income to consecutive salary cuts and relentless taxation.

These are only a few of the examples which one can read in the newspapers but on which many of us with friends and families leaving in Greece can elaborate with specific stories and personal heartbreaking accounts.

**DEG: Greece has seen many general strikes in the past several years, yet they have not been able to stop austerity. Do you think that other measures aside from general strikes are needed?**

**DL:** General strikes and popular mobilizations have destabilized and eventually brought down two different governments since 2009. By November 14, 2012, when a general strike was called across Europe, Greece would go to a national stoppage for the 21<sup>st</sup> time in the last two years. In general, workers and trade unions are caught up in a fragmented labor market characterized by what is called “flexible” employment conditions and are faced with an unequal struggle against employers who have been greatly invigorated by recent legislation. It is clear from cases like that of the nine-month general strike of the steel workers of Hellenic Halyvourgia plant that Greek as well as European capitalists will make no concessions and that unless a continuous general strike is called by the largest and most powerful unions of the country little progress can be made toward stopping the government’s austerity policies. Yet, other forms of resistance greatly hamper the government’s austerity plans.

Financial resistance has been elevated almost into supreme civil duty. Small business owners collectively resist paying the new increased taxes and fees. Some city councils have encouraged their citizens not to pay the taxes imposed by the government through the electricity bill, always under the threat of electricity cuts, while providing the necessary legal coverage. As a result thousands of households resist these practices of rampant taxations imposed on the lower and middle strata of the Greek society. Movements such as the “Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay” mobilize precisely around these kinds of efforts. Also, in many parts of the country, people try to circumvent the austerity by adopting a bartering system. These may be tactics of survival under the extreme conditions of the economic crisis but they also constitute revolutionary practices which challenge not merely the government’s policies but the system of capitalism at its roots.

**DEG: What do you think of other parties (PASOK, New Democracy, Communist Party) and why they are unable to find a way out of the crisis?**

**DL:** The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and New Democracy (ND) are directly responsible for the current economic crisis. PASOK, during the long 30 years that governed the country, moved steadily from Keynesian economic policies in the 1980s to rampant neoliberalism in the

1990s. ND, which had dominated the political scene until PASOK's first electoral victory in 1981 and alternated in power with it ever since, professed all along what they described as "radical liberalism." Today, after three decades of cronyism, unbridled corruption and economic scandals, the ideological convergence of the two parties is complete.

Despite its initial apprehension towards the European Union, membership in the organization enabled PASOK to implement its policies and boost the Greek economy. With the help of substantial financial inflows from what was then known as the European Economic Community (one of the "three pillars" of the EU), PASOK was able to redistribute wealth. Despite the growing government deficits, the emphasis remained on sustaining employment and modernizing the welfare system. In the meantime, democratic socialism – enveloped in patronage and nepotism – evolved into a process for democratizing corruption. Deputy Prime Minister Theodoros Pangalos's infamously vulgar statement in 2010 – "We [government and citizens] fooled away the money together" – alluded to government-bred tactics which for years secured positions for its electorate in an ever-expanding bureaucratic machine. Under the weight of economic scandals, pressure from PASOK's "modernizing wing", and the Maastricht Treaty aim to bring about monetary convergence by 1998, the Greek government launched an extensive program liberalizing the financial and banking sector, slashing government subsidies and pensions, deregulating the labor market and privatizing more than 100 companies between 1994 and 1999.

The implementation of neoliberal policies, increasingly executed by an emerging new breed of technocrat politicians, was often met with strong resistance by labor unions and powerful interest groups – which for years had enjoyed the state's protection. Historically KKE has played an important role in these forms of resistance but has been unable to articulate convincing alternative agendas.

Today, we merely watch the unraveling of a political system which is on its last legs making desperate attempts to survive and safeguard the privileges of the economic and political elites. The most recent corruption scandal involving a list of thousands of Greeks with Swiss bank accounts, the infamous "Lagarde List," is rather telling about the reasons that this government is unable or better unwilling to find a way out of a crisis for which she is directly responsible.

**DEG: What future austerity measures are expected in Greece either from the government and/or the Troika? How do you expect this to affect your organizing in New York?**

**DL:** Greece is undergoing the fifth year of recession. The most recent austerity measures worth of 13.5 billion euros over the next two years were voted just this past November. The new bill raises the retirement age from 65 to 67 and cuts pensions on average between 5% and 15%. Salaries in the public sector will be reduced by about a third, minimum wages will be further slashed to below €400 net, maximum number of workday per week will be increased to six days and work schedules will be increasingly “flexible,” collective bargaining agreements will not be legally enforceable. Along with a series of other labor changes working classes’ status and rights basically regress to what they used to be back in the Interwar period.

In Greece strong resistance is already building against the implementation of these new austerity measures. Increasingly massive protests take place in Europe almost on a regular basis. In NYC we will also continue organizing and mobilizing against the economic and social degradation that is brought upon our societies. This is clearly a class struggle and it has to be fought as such!