

IN CRITICAL AND SUFFOCATING TIMES

What follows is a report on the demo of the 5th of May and the one that followed the day after and some general thoughts on the critical situation the movement in Greece is at the time being.

Although in a period of acute fiscal terrorism escalating day after day with constant threats of an imminent state bankruptcy and “sacrifices to be made”, the proletariat’s response on the eve of the voting of the new austerity measures in Greek parliament was impressive. It was probably the biggest workers’ demonstration since the fall of the dictatorship, even bigger than the 2001 demo which had led to the withdrawal of a planned pension reform. We estimate that there were more than two hundred thousand demonstrators in the centre of Athens and about fifty thousands in the rest of the country. There were strikes in almost all sectors of the (re)production process. A proletarian crowd similar to the one which had taken to the streets in December 2008 (also called derogatorily “hooded youth” by mainstream media propaganda) was also there equipped with axes, sledges, hammers, molotov cocktails, stones, gas masks, goggles and sticks. Although there were instances that hooded rioters were booed when they attempted or actually made violent attacks on buildings, in general they fitted well within this motley, colourful, angered river of demonstrators. The slogans ranged from those that rejected the political system as a whole, like “Let’s burn the Parliament brothel” to patriotic ones, like “IMF go away”, and to populist ones like “Thieves!” and “People demand crooks to be sent to prison”. Aggressive slogans referring to politicians in general are becoming more and more dominant nowadays.

At the GSEE-ADEDY demo people started swarming the place in thousands and the GSEE president was hooted when he started speaking. When the GSEE leadership repeated their detour they had first done on the 11th of March in order to avoid the bulk of the demo and come to the front, just few followed this time...

The demo by the PAME (the CP’s “Workers’ Front”) was also big (well over 20,000) and reached Syntagma Square first. Their plan was to stay there for a while and leave just before the main, bigger demo was about to approach. However, their members would not leave but remained there angered chanting slogans against the politicians. According to the leader of the CP there were fascist provocateurs (she actually accused the LAOS party, this mish-mash of far-right thugs and junta nostalgic scum) carrying PAME placards inciting CP members to storm the Parliament and thus discredit the party’s loyalty to the constitution! Although this accusation bears some validity because fascists were actually seen there, the truth is –according to witnesses– that the CP leaders had some difficulty with their members in leading them quickly away from the square and preventing them from shouting angry slogans against the Parliament. It’s maybe too bold to regard it as a sign of a gradual disobedience to this monolithic party’s iron rule, but in such fluid times no one really knows...

The 70 or more fascists stationed opposite the riot police were cursing the politicians (“Sons of a bitch, politicians”), chanting the national anthem and even throwing some stones against the parliament and probably had the vain intention to prevent any escalation of the violence but were soon swallowed into huge waves of demonstrators approaching the square.

Soon, crowds of workers (electricians, postal workers, municipal workers etc.) tried to enter the building from any access available but there was none as hundreds of riot cops were strung out all along the forecourt and the entrances. Another crowd of workers of both sexes and all ages stood against the cops who were in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier cursing and threatening them. Despite the fact that the riot police made a massive counter-attack with tear gas and fire grenades and managed to disperse the crowd, there were constantly new blocks of demonstrators arriving in front of the Parliament while the first blocks which had been pushed back were reorganizing themselves in Panepistimiou St. and Syngrou Ave. They started smashing whatever they could and attacked the riot police squads who were strung out in the nearby streets. Although most of the big buildings in the centre of the town were closed with rolling shutters, they managed to attack some banks and state buildings. There was extensive destruction of property especially in Syngrou Ave. because the cops were not enough to react immediately against that part of the rioters as the police had been ordered to give priority to the protection of the Parliament and the evacuation of Panepistimiou St. and Stadiou St., the two main avenues through which the crowd was constantly returning to it. Luxury cars, a Tax Office building and the Prefecture of Athens were set on fire and even hours later the area looked like a war-zone.

The fights lasted for almost three hours. It is impossible to record everything that happened in the streets. Just one incident: some teachers and other workers managed to encircle a few riot cops belonging to Group D –a new body of riot police on motorcycles– and thrash them while the cops were screaming “Please no, we are workers, too”!

Demonstrators pushed into Panepistimiou St. kept returning in blocs to the Parliament and there were constant clashes with the police. The crowd was mixed again and would not go. A middle-aged municipal worker with stones in his hands was telling us how much the situation there reminded him of the first years after the fall of the dictatorship when he was present at the 1980 demo in commemoration of the Polytechnic uprising when the police murdered a woman, the 20-year old worker Kanellopoulou.

Soon the terrible news from foreign news agencies came on mobile phones: 3 or 4 people dead in a burnt down bank!

There were some attempts to burn down banks in various places but in most cases the crowd didn't go forward because there were scabs locked in them. It was only the building of Marfin Bank in Stadiou St. that was finally set on fire. Just a few minutes before the tragedy started, however, it was not "hooded hooligans" who shouted "scabs" at the bank employees but organized blocks of strikers who yelled swears at them and called them to abandon the building. Given the bulk of the demo and its density, the turmoil and the noise by the chants, it's obvious that a certain degree of confusion – common in such situations – makes it difficult to provide the accurate facts concerning this tragic incident. What seems to be closer to the truth (from fragments of information by eye-witnesses put together) is that at this particular bank, right in the heart of Athens on a general strike day, about 20 bank clerks were made to work by their boss, got locked "for their protection" and finally 3 of them died of suffocation. Initially a molotov cocktail was thrown through a hole made on the window panes into the ground floor, however, when some bank clerks were seen on the balconies again, some demonstrators called them to leave and then they tried to put the fire out. What actually happened then and how in no time at all the building was ablaze, remains unknown. The macabre series of events that followed with demonstrators trying to help those trapped inside, the fire brigade taking too long to take some of them out, the smiling billionaire banker being chased away by the angry crowd have been probably well reported. After some time the prime minister would announce the news in the Parliament condemning the "political irresponsibility" of those who resist the measures taken and "lead people to death" while the government's "salvation measures" on the contrary "promote life". The reversal was successful. Soon a huge operation by the riot police followed: the crowds were dispersed and chased away, the whole centre was cordoned until late in night, Exarchia got under siege, an anarchist squat was invaded and many were arrested, the Immigrants' Haunt was invaded and trashed and a persistent smoke over the city as well as a sense of bitterness and numbness would not go away...

The consequences were visible the very next day: the media vultures capitalized on the tragic death representing it as a "personal tragedy" dissociated from its general context (mere human bodies cut off from their social relations) and some went so far as to criminalize resistance and protest. The government gained some time changing the subject of discussion and conflict and the unions felt released from any obligation to call for a strike the very day when the new measures were passed. Nonetheless, in such a general climate of fear, disappointment and freeze a few thousands gathered outside the parliament at an evening rally called by the unions and left organizations. Anger was still there, fists were raised, bottles of water and some fire crackers were thrown at the riot cops and slogans both against the parliament and the cops were chanted. An old woman was begging people to chant to "make them [the politicians] leave", a guy pissed in a bottle and threw it to the cops, few anti-authoritarians were to be seen and when it got dark and the unions and most organizations left, people, quite ordinary, everyday people with bare hands would not go. Attacked with ferocity by the riot police, chased away, trampled down Syntagma square steps, panicked but angered young and old people got dispersed in nearby streets. Everything was back in order. However, not only fear was in their eyes; hatred was visible as well. It is certain they will be back.

Now some more general reflections:

- Cracking down on anarchists and anti-authoritarians has already started and it will get more acute. Criminalizing a whole social-political milieu reaching out to the far left organizations has always been used as a diversion by the state and it will be used even more so now that the murderous attack creates such favourable conditions. However, framing anarchists will not make those hundreds of thousands who demonstrated and even those a lot more who stayed passive but worried forget the IMF and the "salvation package" offered to them by the government. Harassing our milieu will not pay people's bills nor guarantee their future which remains bleak. The government will soon have to incriminate resistance in general and has already started doing so as the incidents on the 6th of May clearly indicated.
- There will be some modest effort from the state to "put the blame" on certain politicians in order to appease the "popular feeling" which may well turn into a "thirst for blood". Some

blatant cases of “corruption” may get punished and some politicians may be sacrificed just to pour oil into troubled waters.

- There is a constant reference to a “constitutional deviation” coming both from the LAOS or the CP in a recrimination spectacle, revealing though of the ruling class increasing fears of a deepening political crisis, a deepening of the legitimization crisis. Various scenarios (a businessmen’s party, a proper junta-like regime) get recycled reflecting deeper fears of a proletarian uprising but in effect are used as a re-orientation of the debt crisis issue from the streets to the central political stage and to the banal question “who will be the solution?” instead of “what is the ‘solution’?”
- Having said all that, it is time to get to the more crucial matters. It is more than clear that the sickening game of turning the dominant fear/guilt for the debt into a fear/guilt for the resistance and the (violent) uprising against the terrorism of debt has already started. If class struggle escalates, the conditions may look more and more like the ones in a proper civil war. The question of violence has already become central. In the same way we assess the state’s management of violence, we are obliged to assess proletarian violence, too: the movement has to deal with the legitimation of rebellious violence and its content in practical terms. As for the anarchist-antiauthoritarian milieu itself and its dominant insurrectional tendency the tradition of a fetishized, macho glorification of violence has been too long and consistent to remain indifferent now. Violence as an end in itself in all its variations (including armed struggle proper) has been propagated constantly for years now and especially after the December rebellion a certain degree of *nihilistic decomposition* has become evident (there were some references to it in our text *The Rebellious Passage*), extending over the milieu itself. In the periphery of this milieu, in its margins, a growing number of very young people has become visible promoting nihilistic limitless violence (dressed up as “December’s nihilism”) and “destruction” even if this also includes variable capital (in the form of scabs, “petit-bourgeois elements”, “law-abiding citizens”). Such a degeneration coming out of the rebellion and its limits as well as out of the crisis itself is clearly evident. Certain condemnations of these behaviours and a self-critique to some extent have already started in the milieu (some anarchist groups have even called the perpetrators “parastatal thugs”) and it is quite possible that organized anarchists and anti-authoritarians (groups or squats) will try to isolate both politically and operationally such tendencies. However, the situation is more complicated and it is surpassing the theoretical and practical (self)critical abilities of this milieu. In hindsight, such tragic incidents with all their consequences might have happened in the December rebellion itself: what prevented them was not only chance (a petrol station that did not explode next to buildings set on fire on Sunday the 7th of December, the fact that the most violent riots took place at night with most buildings empty), but also the creation of a (though limited) *proletarian public sphere* and of *communities of struggle* which found their way not only through violence but also through their own content, discourse and other means of communication. It was these pre-existing communities (of students, football hooligans, immigrants, anarchists) that turned into communities of struggle by the subjects of the rebellion themselves that gave to violence a meaningful place. Will there be such communities again now that not only a proletarian minority is involved? Will there be a practical way of self-organization in the workplaces, in the neighborhoods or in the streets to determine the form and the content of the struggle and thus place violence in a liberating perspective? Uneasy questions in pressing times but we will have to find the answers struggling.

TPTG
9th of May