

REPORT FROM GREECE ON THE CORONA-VIRUS DYSTOPIAN REALITY

While in Greece “states of exception” have not been uncommon -on the contrary, more or less we have been in an extraordinary, emergency regime of extreme austerity and repression due to the “debt crisis” since 2010- the recent biopolitical management of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic by the government seems to be increasingly authoritarian.

Initially, in late February and early March, when the first cases of infected people were reported -ironically, most of them were pilgrims returning from Israel and Jerusalem bringing not only Holy Grace back home- the only measures taken were the cancellation of carnival events and the closures of schools, universities, theatres and cinemas in some affected regions where most cases were detected. As more were to follow, all educational institutions closed down for 14 days on March 11th, then followed cafes, bars, malls, restaurants, gyms, museums, archaeological sites, excluding supermarkets, pharmacies and food outlets for delivery and take-aways only. News reports became more and more terrifying starting with the number of deaths in the country and nearby countries and the government slogan “We remain indoors” began overwhelming the public sphere. A cell broadcast message was sent to all smartphones on 11, March by a government agency supposedly to inform people on the virus but causing more anxiety and confusion and another one followed a week later stressing again the necessity to “remain indoors”. Actually, a lot of people ignored the government call for self-restrictions on movement and outdoor gathering and went out to beaches and open air places. The next days all organized beaches and tourist resorts closed, air traffic with Italy and Spain was banned and some days later the borders with Albania and North Macedonia closed.

Public transport has been restricted, passengers to Greece will be detained at home for 14 days and since Wednesday (18/3) all retail shops except few categories have been closed down. Panic reactions in supermarkets with hordes of people amassing huge quantities of commodities (+42% compared a month before, if fast-moving consumer goods are taken into account) led to restrictions on number of customers in a given supermarket and the imposition of a minimum distance between customers.

With a devastated public health system after subsequent Memoranda and cuts, the government knows only too well why they should be panicked when thousands of people will become ill with the virus. The announcement of urgent hiring of 2000 doctors and nurses with a two-year work contract is next to nothing compared to the low number of Intensive Care Units functioning (557 instead of 3500), with 80 of them being idle due to lack of personnel and 25% of them being permanently closed. The overworked hospital personnel had been cut during the previous years, job vacancies are 45000 and public health expenses range between a meagre 4.7 to 5.2 % of the GDP - beware the -30% decrease of GDP, compared to 2009 results, when discussing those ridiculously small percentages.

The prime minister wife’s initiative to call people to “thank” doctors and nurses for their efforts against the virus by clapping their hands in their balconies at a fixed time in the evening some days ago had unfortunately some success and, for the time being at least, it shows the extent of the resignation of the population in the

face of the state terrorist slogan of “remain indoors”, which prevents public demands for a rise in social reproduction state expenses.

It is important to note that it is a conservative, right-wing neoliberal government that applies state interventionist measures, praises public hospitals and the national medical system in general, bans national parades (both military and school ones), closes churches and turns the “Invisible Hand” of the market wherever they want.

Although the Greek state has been under Enhanced Surveillance for ten years now, the institutions and the Eurogroup decided on Monday (16/3) to scrap its obligation for a primary surplus of 3.5% of GDP this year. Also, the government has promised liquidity shots (2 bn) to affected businesses and announced suspension of amortization payments as well as payments of tax and insurance liabilities, requisition of private hospital beds etc. Central planning at its best!

As days pass, the restrictive measures in movement become heavier and the propaganda of fear is gaining ground. Even political groups of the anti-authoritarian milieu limit their activities, cancel their events or even approve of the quarantine in the name of public health protection and “(self)-responsibility”.

The isolation or self-isolation imposed at the moment is not very promising as the necessary precondition for any successful struggle is cooperation through physical encounter. At the same time, an attitude of internalized self-discipline and fear (if not even outcry of “irresponsible behaviour” on the part of those still gathering in public spaces and social centers) can be very convenient indeed for the state and its repressive mechanisms, as the outcome of a recent antifascist demo in the town of Rethymno showed: 100 people were surrounded by cops, beaten up and taken to court. One wonders what will happen if workers start organizing around demands such as full wages, less work hours or stop altogether, bigger unemployment benefits, paid medical expenses...

The “wages of exception” in a state of exception

Even though many (small-scale and large-scale) capitalists have profited from the implementation of the extreme austerity policies of the last 10 years, by means of labour market deregulation, both direct and indirect wage decreases, tax redemptions etc, their greed seems bottomless. Currently, they try to take advantage of the declared “state of emergency” (or situation of “war economy” as the prime minister called it during one recent TV address): the Greek state capitalizes on the COVID-19 pandemic to further implement new emergency laws that will lead in the enhanced precariousness of labour and waged-labour cost decrease, in line with the persistent neoliberal doctrines. From the capitalist point of view the timing is crucial, as the financial consequences of the COVID-19 crisis are yet to be seen. In terms of the Greek regime of accumulation, it must be kept in mind that the tourist sector and all tourist-related services, such as cafes, restaurants, catering, construction/renovation, retail, logistics etc., are among the most important ones in terms of their GDP share.

What follows is a short list of measures that have been announced over the last week. It is important to note that these measures affect differently the various sectors of value production and circulation, so they should be used with caution when it comes to generalize about i.e. direct and indirect wage decreases or the

legal status of those currently unemployed. On the other hand, this list is indicative of the capitalist strategy to a) pass on the lion's share of the financial cost to the working class and b) further designate a labour market that will allow larger profit margins, when "normal" conditions of value production and realization are re-established.

In the public sector:

Workers in schools, universities etc. have not been working since March the 11th, following the government's decision to lock down all educational facilities, ranging from state nursery schools to universities. Sport facilities, gyms and museums were also affected by this ban. Despite the fact that those workers are not currently working they still get paid accordingly (for the moment at least).

The most affected public sector workers by the COVID-19 outbreak are, obviously, nurses, doctors and all others working in hospitals, who have to work under extremely intensive and dangerous conditions. Following a massive downsizing of public healthcare system due to both a 25% personnel decrease and slashed state funding, the understaffed and under-equipped hospitals will soon be unable to handle emergencies related to COVID-19 or other causes. For the moment, in most hospitals no COVID-19 tests are conducted to the hospital personnel, while the tests are used for seriously infected patients or the elderly. In some cases, due to lack of specialized personnel, unpaid MSc or PhD students have to analyze the results, leading in crucial delays. On top of that, the understaffed personnel is forced to remain in service despite showing signs of the virus infection and having access to very limited resources of personal protective masks and/or gloves. As mentioned above, there are only 557 active intensive care beds nationwide (224 in Athens, alone). The same is true for the hospitals on islands where the infrastructure and personnel is not sufficient to accommodate the needs of both locals and immigrants (see below). To deal with the current emergency situation the government has decided to immediately hire 2,000 doctors and nursing staff, a number which simply sounds like a complete joke when compared to the 26,000 personnel decrease, between 2010-2018, even more so because that number corresponds to the new job positions that had already been announced since early June, some months before the COVID-19 was first reported in China... One should always keep in mind that by the first implementation of Memoranda in 2010 the hospitals were already understaffed, as a result of state policies to continuously keep healthcare funding below EU average. In that sense the post-2010 devalorisation politics have decisively deteriorated and already devastated sector.

The "We remain indoors" propaganda has been proven successful in decreasing hospital workload too, as it is not only the streets and public spaces that are evacuated by the citizens, but also the emergency clinics of hospitals. It must be noted that out-patient clinics have effectively been shut down (excl. drug prescriptions) thus limiting the access to state healthcare by default. It is through this artificial and violent constriction of social medical needs that the state healthcare system is still functional.

In the private sector:

In all, after the gradual locking down of numerous sectors ca. 1,000.000 workers are estimated to be (either temporarily or not) without work. Those workers are

not entitled to get paid by their employers according to their contract-defined wage, on the grounds of the “state of exception” that was officially declared by the government: faced with slashed turnovers by early March, numerous employers’ associations have immediately resorted to lay-offs, obligatory leaves without pay and/or fierce lobbying in favour of massive lockdowns.

More specifically:

By March 12/3 all private gyms were locked down, while the following day the measure was extended to include all restaurants (excl. take-aways and those providing delivery services) and bars. This measure had major impacts on (youth) employment, as most of the food and beverage sector numerous workers are young proletarians, who often work under precarious and intensified terms (unregistered or under-declared contracts, irregular week schedules etc.). By Wednesday 18/3, the measure was re-extended to almost the whole retail sector, with the obvious exclusion of sectors such as pharmacies, supermarkets, groceries, bakeries, banks, gas stations, take-aways and... funeral services. The workers employed in sectors related to medical equipment and/or products are now under a “zero hour contract”, as the shops remain closed, but the services can be provided by appointment only. Hostels and hotels are to follow by this week.

All those workers who have been directly affected by the official state “lockdown” measures, as well as those who got fired during the COVID-19 initial outbreak (since the beginning of March ca. 40,000 according to some reports, most of them in the tourist industry) or still work in very low profit businesses are entitled to receive a 800-euro “state benefit”, for the period from 15th of March till the end of April (that is 535 euros per month, well below the current minimum nominal wage of 650 euros). All beneficiaries are also qualified for a 40% rent discount, in case they have no property of their own and rent an apartment, though no details were given who is going to cover that 40% discount.

According to the state officials, the “locked-down” workers are not unemployed, but rather had “their work contracts suspended”, an alarming neologism that makes one wonder about what the actual legal consequences are, i.e. when capitalist “normality” is re-established will current contracts still remain valid? It’s no wonder that the “zero redundancy clause” legislated by the state for all companies that want to make use of state financial support, only ensures the nominal number of job positions, but not the type of work contract or, even more so, the corresponding wage related to those positions. For instance, it is yet unclear when workers with “suspended contracts” will receive the “Easter wage” (an extra wage amounting to 50% of the nominal wage that employers are forced by law to provide before the Easter vacations).

Apart from enjoying various credit, loan, tax, rent or other administrative facilitations (in the form of suspension of various payments for instance), the capitalists are also freed from the obligation to cover the social security liabilities of their “suspended” employees for as long as the ban is effective: the corresponding cost will also be funded by the state budget.

From the above, it must already be clear enough: what’s unfolding before our eyes is another crude attempt to socialize the capitalist losses, by channeling primary balance surplus money (that is money from working class’ direct and indirect wage decreases and income and purchases taxation etc.) straight to the capitalists’

pockets. The state money distribution is telling: out of the total package of 9.8bn euros (incl. 1.8 bn from the European Investment Fund and 6bn of guarantees to stimulate working capital corporate loans), the money directly channeled to the affected workers amount to only 0.45 bn or... 4.5%. Another important aspect of the current financial and social crisis is related to those already unemployed (1,076.134 by January 2020) and to unregistered workers. No special provisions for all those have been announced, apart from a 2-month extension of all unemployment benefits ending the first quarter of 2020 (ca. 200,000)

As all schools have been closed and grandparents, an integral and important part of the local familistic welfare regime, who have traditionally been providing childcare should not come in contact with children, new special leaves for parents with children under 15 years old were legislated. But only one parent can apply for such a leave and its cost (nominal wage and social security levies) is shared both by the employers (by 2/3) and the state (1/3): another straightforward way to socialize the capitalist costs. Workers who make use of this “special leave” have to simultaneously make use of their normal (paid) leave: for every 3 days of the special leave the worker applies, (s)he has to apply for 1 day of normal leave as well. That means if (s)he is not entitled to get “normal” leaves (this is the case for newly employed workers), then (s)he is not entitled to this special leave either. In any case, many were the cases of parents getting laid off only because they tried to get this special leave. Others were blackmailed to make use of their normal leaves or even to obligatorily get “a few days off” without pay.

But it is not just those who (temporarily or not) lost their jobs and wages who are directly affected by the new measures. Those still working may also find themselves in deep shit, as is the case for supermarket, supply chain/logistics/couriers/delivery and call-center workers, who all work under flexible schedules, unpaid overtimes, extremely intensified conditions and, as if the above are not already enough, without sufficient -if any- personal protective equipment. The latter was true for the whole period before the state bans and for all sectors nationwide: in most cases no guidelines were provided by the management on how to avoid getting infected while at work, or those guidelines were rather dated and/or inadequate. It's not surprising that in many cases workers had to buy protective equipment themselves, a rather difficult task considering the huge public demand for gloves, masks and antiseptics (in many pharmacies long queues were observed and the protective equipment was sold out within hours if not minutes).

The government capitalized on people's massive rush to supermarkets to buy protective equipment and other necessary products or food and decided to extend all supermarkets work schedule from 9am-9pm to 7am-10pm (Mondays-Saturdays), while supermarkets will obligatorily remain open on Sundays too (from 9am to 5pm). Regarding the latter, it's worth noting that a number of workers on retail sector have been fighting against the legislation of Sunday-work since 2010 and it was only recently, according to the 2019 “development law”, that supermarkets were allowed to open up to 32 Sundays per year.

As a response to the above, a bunch of grassroots initiatives, among both supermarket and call-centers workers, are currently trying to expose the current working conditions of extreme intensification and/or the lack of protective measures. However, the working class general response to the overall state-led

measures (535-euro state benefits instead of full wages, “suspended work contracts” etc.) has so far been disappointing, both in magnitude and content.

Regarding the administrative level:

According to the current state of affairs, the capitalists have no obligation to declare the daily working schedule of their employees to the waged-labour registration e-platform, by which they are (in theory at least) monitored by the Body of Labour Inspectors. This basically means that they can legally avoid declaring a worker, thus avoiding paying work-stamps, but it also means they can modify as they wish the type of contracts, work schedules, shifts and days-off to better suit their production needs. For instance, many cases of obligatory conversions of full-time to part-time contracts were reported. The capitalists can, moreover, avoid declaring overtimes, thus increasing their profits and workers' exhaustion. While we all know that trying to bypass state labour legislature was commonplace among capitalists, it is worthwhile noting that it is the state itself that now allows such (previously) illegal practices. It's not by accident, therefore, that one of the representatives of capital said «The job market works much better like that, when it's more flexible».

It is through this condition of embedded flexibility that shift-work and remote-work -rather limited practices until now- have been introduced to a much larger scale in the local labour market, while the ban on almost all retail shops, has paved the way for the online (e-shop) services proliferation, as is the case for the related logistics sector.

The current situation among immigrants in detention centres

The situation among detained immigrants on the Greek islands can be described as rather chaotic. The 16th of March there was a fire in the migrant detention camp of Moria, in Lesbos, which led to the tragic death of a 6-year old child. The fire quickly got out of control due to the strong winds in the area, but also due to the fact that fire-fighting vehicles could not approach the site, as a result of the extremely overcrowded informal migrant settlements surrounding the facilities: while the infrastructure is said to have a capacity of 2,800 persons, the immigrants living there must be ca. 20,000-22,000! In total, more than 42,000 immigrants, including children, are trapped in Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos. In the beginning of February (that is, before the emergence of COVID-19) there was much talk about disease outbreak in the camps. The United Nations Refugee Agency has made an urgent call for the evacuation of Moria, as there is a threat of a pandemic outbreak that could affect the rest of the island: *“Humans with severe breathing problems live inside tents which are wet because of moisture and the winter rains. There is no hot water at all and the detainees must wait for three hours in a cold environment to receive food. All of them are undernourished, with bleeding gums.”* This is just a fraction of what is actually happening in Moria, according to the UN doctors that work there.

Dealing with such a bleak situation, the Greek government came to realize that a) you reap what you sow and b) you can't rob Peter to pay Paul: after having waged an electoral campaign based on far-right, anti-immigrant rhetoric, it now finds itself obliged to simultaneously satisfy its electoral clientele on the islands, which demands “decongesting the islands from all immigrants” and “controlling

immigrant presence” (i.e. it is no wonder that one of the very first measures that the new government had announced was the annulment of the asylum seekers’ social security number, which was granting them access to health services), *and* obey the current EU policy that dictates the creation of massive immigrant detention centers / ‘buffer zones’ at its borders, that is on the very same islands.

However, the government’s first attempt to move several immigrants from the detention centers to similar centers located in the mainland was met with huge local opposition there, mostly based on sheer xenophobic reflexes. The plan-b, then, was to construct more, larger enclosed detention centers on the islands and place in them those 42,000 people who have already been trapped there and all those that would attempt to cross the borders in the future. But this plan was also met with, even harsher actually, local reactions, mostly from the right but also from the left, as local interests (partly related to the touristic industry) would be affected. In February, locals fought fiercely against the government’s aim to turn those islands into permanent immigrant prisons by mere force (several riot police squads had been called out, only to make things worse as their presence *unified* local opposition against them). In the end the government was forced to back down.

After the end of the fight of the locals with the riot police squads and the military closure of the Greek-Turkish borders in early March, right-wing citizen initiatives have successfully managed to turn the local dissatisfaction with healthcare state provisions and state requisition of land for the new prisons into anti-immigrant and anti-NGO propaganda.

It is in this complicated and claustrophobic context, that the pandemic broke out and the immigrants were initially left to their own devices. Shortly afterwards, however, the government implemented harsh measures of mere biopolitical control, under the pretext of COVID-19 spread, despite the fact that all people infected so far are Greeks. In the detention centers in particular the only reported case of COVID-19 infections is that of a police officer in Amygdaleza, Attiki.

The strict legislature against detained immigrants include curfews, new fencing enclosures (around informal settlements) and solitary confinement areas for those that get infected, restricted transport permits to urban centers (in order to buy additional means of subsistence), ban on all indoors activities/meetings etc. However, what was not announced was the most effective preventive measure of all, that is the immediate shut down of all detention centers. More than ever, all of them now look like prisons! Despite that, the so-called Moria Corona Awareness Team, a group staffed by volunteers who have applied for asylum status, expressed its satisfaction for the (repressive) measures taken by the Greek authorities: *“These restrictions are useful and necessary for refugees in order to be protected from coronavirus”* and *“for that we thank the Greeks who imposed the measures, and in a very peaceful way”!*

In Kos island the mayor announced his intention to hire private security personnel so as to limit immigrants’ presence in a number of public spaces, thus resulting in even greater congregation within the detention centers, but also precluding similar measures to the nation-wide population.

As a matter of fact, the whole country starts looking like a prison: the Deputy Minister of Civil Protection and Crisis Management has recently announced the first

martial law measure: the prohibition of all public gatherings of more than 10 people by 19/3, while offenders will be fined with 1,000 euros! This was soon followed by the lock down of all parks, public squares, hills and other recreational areas but also by the prohibition of all travels towards the islands for non-locals.

The continuous, on a daily basis actually, extension of such draconian and authoritative measures, which soon extend to ban all “unnecessary movement”, not only shows the state’s determination for greater control over social life, but it also reveals that it is the state itself that aims to further fuel the current pandemic of panic among citizens. For instance, according to the more recent measures, only 1 person per 15m² is now allowed in supermarkets (compared to the 1 per 10m² before), thus inciting even longer queues, let alone that such a strict rule is not applied in workplaces and prisons/detention centers... Day by day, measure after measure, people seem to get used to this abnormal and irrational “necessity”, according to which even the rip out of ordinary wooden benches from streets and squares seems reasonable. The government propaganda of “irresponsible citizens who disobey quarantine” has proven to be, partially at least, successful in that in certain cases locals in rural areas and small towns have greeted visitors from urban centers with suspicion, if not hostility.

The current situation in prisons

There has been an horizontal ban on both granted leaves (i.e. days-off prison for those prisoners who have completed at least 1/5 of their sentence) and the so-called “free visits” (i.e. open meetings of detainees with their relatives in prison facilities without strict time limits). The short meetings (only 10 to 15-minute long) that initially were allowed behind glass windows are banned, too. On top of that, food, clothes and other (such as books) packages from relatives were prohibited. Barriers in lawyer visits have also been reported. On top of that, the Ministry of Public Order has recommended the use of isolated areas in every prison, each being capable of accommodating 10-20 COVID-19 infected (or potentially infected) inmates. However, the prison managers have already stated their inability to implement such a measure, due to prison overcrowding.

Female detainees have publicized a text, which was communicated through lawyers to the Ministry stating that they are both cooperative and strictly compliant with some of the above measures and that, from their part, “there is a great deal of responsibility”. They demanded that the political leadership show responsibility, too, and accept their proposals, among which are releasing all inmates convicted with less than 5 years of imprisonment, as well as releasing all incarnated mothers with underage children and those who are vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. Similar demands were also made by the Prisoners’ Rights Initiative, mostly focusing on the need to secure safe life-conditions within prisons and decrease overpopulation both in prisons and police detention centers, by means of on-parole releases and other similar policies.

Protests

The last big demonstration in the country took place on the island of Lesbos on March 14. It was an anti-fascist/pro-immigration demo which was supported by the

local Hospital Doctors' Union and was accused of "irresponsibility" by the government supporters all over the country.

The only call for strike this week was issued by the Union of Archaeologists who demanded to stop working, a demand that was met by the Ministry of Culture.

A collective hunger-strike, of more than 1,200 immigrants detained in Korinthos detention camp has been initiated by March 20, protesting against the harsh living conditions, also demanding to be freed. Whether this protest was mostly related to the UN anti-racism day (21/3) or extends further than that, remains unclear at the moment.

After dark, there are more cops in the streets than ordinary people. If there's going to be a curfew this weekend or next week, it will be very difficult for comrades who are still active to get together or put their banners, stickers etc over the city of Athens.

Assembly of Workers-Unemployed from Syntagma Square

TPTG

March 22, 2020