

Greece: Deepening Economic and Social Crisis

Downward economic spiral with massive political and social ramifications

By [Socialist Project](#)

Global Research, October 24, 2012

[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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Greece is in a grueling downward economic spiral with massive political and social ramifications. Aspects of Greek society are literally falling apart at the seams. Across the whole eurozone – the countries that use the euro as a common currency – unemployment is at a record high of 18.2 million people without work in August. Across the 27-nation European Union, the number of jobless has climbed to 25.5 million. In Greece last May, unemployment reached 23 per cent for the total population and a staggering 55.4 per cent for youth.

Greece's gross domestic product – the main measure of economic output – contracted by 6.5 per cent last year and is expected to shrink by a further 3.5 per cent this year. 2013 will be Greece's sixth year of recession. This will further compound the misery, pain and desperation of Greek society. Suicides have increased along with breadlines in Athens.

Adding to this catastrophe, the ruling coalition government in Greece, led by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras of the center-right New Democracy, is planning to ram through additional cuts and a hike in regressive taxes. Officials from the 'troika' – the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank – are seeking agreement on these austerity measures before Greece can receive over \$31-billion in loans for the recapitalization of its banks.

These further cuts, coming after years of devastating austerity, will hit the working-class and poor hard, turning up the temperature in the already simmering Greek cauldron. The 2013 draft budget includes \$5-billion in pension and public-sector salary cuts.

Growth of Golden Dawn

This is the context that explains the alarming growth in popularity for Golden Dawn, the Greek neo-Nazi party. Golden Dawn won 18 parliamentary seats out of 300 in the June elections to become Greece's fifth-largest political party. Polls now indicate that the percentage of people with "positive views" about Golden Dawn has grown from 12 per cent in May to 22 per cent today. If an election were held now, based on these polls, Golden Dawn could become Greece's third-largest party, replacing the former ruling PASOK party, after New Democracy and SYRIZA, the coalition of the radical left. Though it is also possible the Greece's corporate-controlled media has an interest in exaggerating its influence, there can be no doubt that the reported increase in support for Golden Dawn is all too real.

Since Golden Dawn secured a parliamentary foothold, it has increased its violent attacks on

immigrants and the left – a strategy central to its growth and appeal.

Greece has some 1.5 million immigrants, many of them legal, among a total population of around 11 million. Some 80 per cent of Europe's incoming migrants end up in Greece because of European Union border restrictions. Many of these migrants are fleeing crisis and poverty in Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere.

Golden Dawn casts blame on immigrants for bringing crime and economic crisis to Greece. A [recent video](#) documented a 40-person nighttime patrol organized by Golden Dawn that marched through a market in Rafina, northeast of Athens. Anyone with a stall who looked foreign was asked for a permit. Black-shirted thugs smashed up the stalls of those they claimed didn't have a permit. Small groups of Golden Dawn members, known in the party as "storm troopers," roam immigrant neighborhoods on bikes, using the pretense that they are preventing crime.

Even more ominously, large sections of the Greek police force are known to be sympathetic to Golden Dawn. When Golden Dawn members have attacked immigrants and left-wingers, the police have looked the other way. The police themselves participate in violent attacks on immigrants and other targets of the Nazis' hate. A group of anti-fascist protesters are charging that the Athens Attica General Police Directorate tortured them after they were arrested during a confrontation with Golden Dawn members. In some sections of Athens, when people come to report crimes, the police encourage them to take their problems to Golden Dawn.

Because of the austerity measures, public services are literally disappearing for sections of society. Golden Dawn is attempting to fill the vacuum through food and clothes distribution, but for "Greeks only" – those who can prove their national identity. Golden Dawn members also organized a blood drive to be used for "Greeks only" – but doctors and health associations condemned the event and said the blood would go to anyone who needed it.

Blaming Immigrants

If Golden Dawn has been able to gain a further hearing in recent months, they have Greece's mainstream parties to thank. In a recent interview, Prime Minister Samaras blamed immigrants for creating "major distress" in Greece. The government organizes "sweeps" of immigrants who are then housed in closed camps before they are deported.

In this way, the government reinforces and legitimizes the notion that immigrants are to blame for the crisis engulfing the lives of millions of Greeks, providing grist for the Golden Dawn violence mill. And through immigrant-bashing, the government also hopes to redirect fury away from its own inability to find a solution to the crisis.

At the same time, as conditions continue to unravel, bitterness is growing toward the coalition government. But for those furious with the government's abject failure to deal with the crisis, immigrants can become an immediate target for anger and despair.

Golden Dawn opposes the austerity demanded by what they call the "foreign" European Union bosses and implemented by the coalition government. But they also attack the government for not doing enough to rid the country of the scapegoats they blame for causing the crisis. In this way, the fascists can then justify taking matters into their own hands.

Golden Dawn has a conscious strategy aimed at polarizing and inflaming opinion. The organization recently proposed a new public holiday to commemorate the victims of Communist resistance fighters at the end of the Second World War – these victims, and Golden Dawn’s “heroes,” were mainly collaborators with the Nazis who occupied Greece during the war.

To capture funding and win increased support, Golden Dawn has opened up an [office in New York City](#) and is also attempting to organize in Australia [[and Canada](#)] among thousands of Greeks who have fled there to escape the economic crisis.

Despite the frightening evidence of the fascists’ rising popularity, some voices are downplaying the threat they pose. Niall Ferguson, author of the *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order*, makes the absurd claim in an article for *Newsweek* magazine that, despite the advance of the Greek fascists and other neo-Nazis across Europe, there isn’t too much to worry about.

Basing his argument on the aging of the European population, Ferguson thinks fascism is only for those under 30 with the energy to march around and beat people up. Demonstrating an astonishing degree of stupidity, he writes, “Blackshirts were bad and brownshirts were worse. But who’s honestly afraid of grayshirts. Fascism still isn’t funny. But the more it ages, the less it scares me.” Tell that to the victims of Golden Dawn violence. Stopping Greece’s fascists is a crucial and urgent task.

Europe-Wide Phenomenon

The emergence of Golden Dawn is part of the Europe-wide phenomenon of right-wing populist and neo-fascist parties becoming more prominent in response to the economic meltdown. The threat has grown more substantial. After the horrors of the Second World War, fascism was discredited and forced onto the fringes of European society. With the onset of crisis in the late 1970s, this changed in some countries, like Britain, where the fascist National Front made some electoral inroads and attempted to begin to flex its street-fighting muscle. However, the far right’s progress was stalled through massive counter-mobilizations that exposed the neo-Nazis ideologically and confronted them physically.

In his 1997 book *The Beast Reawakens*, Martin A. Lee describes how neo-Nazis rebooted their strategies in the early 1980s:

“The jackals of the extreme right believed they found the crucial pressure point when they seized upon immigration as the main issue to rally around. While a network of ultra-right wing cadres continued to function as the violent vanguard of xenophobia, some shock troops from Europe’s neo-fascist underground split off to form mass-based political parties.

“One of the advantages of this dual-pronged effort was that it provided an electoral front for hard-core militants, who underwent an ideological face-lift and watered down their pronouncements to conform to electoral requirements.

“By the mid-1980s, a flock of radical right-wing parties had found a nesting place on the democratic landscape. The initial success of the Front National in France and its emulators elsewhere showed that large segments of Western European society were vulnerable to national populists and the totalitarian temptation they embodied. These forces had already started to gain momentum when the Berlin Wall parted and the Soviet Union disintegrated.”

The collapse of the Berlin Wall was followed by an upsurge in support for neo-fascist organizations in West Germany. In the former East German Republic, the promises of unification gave way to unemployment, poverty and extreme dislocation, leading to growth in support for far-right organizations.

Dave Renton in *Fascism: Theory and Practice* argues that the:

“decisive turning point came with the European elections in 1984. The French Front National benefited from favorable media coverage, which followed its successful alliance with the conservative right in the local elections in Dreux. Jean-Marie Le Pen was already a nationally prominent figure, but the FN’s unprecedented success came as a shock. The party won 11 per cent of the vote with 10 of its candidates duly elected as Euro MPs. The FN became respectable and moved into the political mainstream...

“By the early 1990s, the French experience had generalized. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism combined with international economic recession to create conditions favorable to the rise of the far right. Accordingly, fascist parties consolidated their successes across Europe.”

When billionaire Silvio Berlusconi was elected Italy’s prime minister in 1994, the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), led by Gianfranco Fini, joined the governing coalition. The MSI was awarded five ministerial posts and several other important governmental assignments.

The inclusion of neo-fascists disguised as right-wing populists in Italy’s government had implications for all Europe in breaking a longstanding taboo against the fascists and moving politics to the right. Lee goes on to point out:

“Ironically, their success hinged to a great extent on their ability to distance themselves from the historical image of fascism. While neo-Nazi nostalgics fixated on the swastika, the more astute theoreticians of the European New Right understood efforts to justify Hitler and the fascist dictatorships of the past were futile and ill-conceived.

“Much of the New Right’s revamped ideology was scooped up by camouflaged neo-fascist organizations as they embarked upon their quest for power. By campaigning first and foremost as protectors of Western Europe’s cultural identity and economic prosperity, right-wing extremists were able to elbow their way into the mainstream.”

Political stabilization and economic growth from the mid-1990s slowed the growth of the far right in parts of Europe. However, neoliberal globalization continued to degrade working-class living standards, in Europe as elsewhere around the world, producing bitterness and a breakdown in long-established political loyalties – meaning that far-right populists and neo-fascists could continue to make inroads.

As British socialist and anti-Nazi activist Martin Smith wrote:

“We have seen a growth of fascist parties across Europe over the past 30 years. In the 2004 European elections, while the BNP gained 4.9 per cent of the vote, Belgium’s Vlaams Belang polled 23.2 per cent, Italy’s Alleanza Nazionale 11.5 per cent and Le Pen’s Front National 9.81 per cent. At a local council level, the gap is even wider.

“The Front National had close to 2,000 councilors by the end of the 1990s and Vlaams

Belang had 809 municipal and 88 provincial councilors elected in 2006, compared to the BNP's 55. The so-called "new fascist" parties have all seen their fortunes grow when the mainstream political parties of the center have collapsed or have been politically damaged by scandal or political crisis. They have also grown while the mainstream parties legitimize racism or attack ethnic minority communities."

The British National Party (BNP), a split from the more openly fascist National Front, modeled itself very closely on France's Front National. In 2009, the BNP had a major breakthrough, receiving almost one million votes and gaining two seats in the European parliament.



In the 2012 French presidential election, the Front National's party leader [Marine Le Pen](#) – the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, campaigning on an Islamophobic, anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic platform – won almost 18 per cent of the total vote. This was the Front's best-ever electoral result.

The Greek Golden Dawn is part of the same arc of far-right growth. But they haven't attempted to emulate the strategies of the successful reconstructed fascists.

Though Golden Dawn members will say they are simply ultra-nationalist, the real character of organization is clear from its literature, the Nazi-like salutes, the regular denials of the Nazi Holocaust by party leaders, and Golden Dawn's strategies and tactics. This is in part to do with political traditions within Greece, but Golden Dawn's prominence today is centrally an indication of how deep the social crisis in Greece has become.

Rise of Anti-Fascism

Golden Dawn and the rest of the far right in Europe are a real danger. However, they can be stopped.

Across Greece, new anti-fascist organizations are mobilizing to defend immigrant neighborhoods and left-wing organizations, and to confront the fascists on the streets where they attempt to exercise their power through intimidation, violence and harassment. In Athens, anti-fascists are organizing nighttime motorbike patrols through immigrant neighborhoods.

Over the last few weeks, Europe has been engulfed with furious protests against austerity in Spain, Italy, Portugal, France and Greece. Last week, Greek unions held their first general strike since the summer elections. More strikes are planned over the next two weeks to oppose any austerity agreement between the coalition government and the troika.

Austerity will deepen Greece's social crisis, which has already reached 1930s levels. This provides space for the fascist garbage to grow – which is why it's so important to build opposition to further cuts. Mass strikes and demonstrations can refocus anger on the actual cause of the crisis: the government, bankers, the wealthy and the institutions in Greece and Europe responsible for the mess.

SYRIZA, the coalition of radical left organizations, has also experienced a massive growth in popularity as Greek society polarizes. The coalition came within a few percentage points of winning two successive elections last spring, and polls show it continues to be viewed as the

chief opposition to the government led by New Democracy.

A united left can lead the opposition to austerity through collective working-class action and solidarity, confront the fascists on the streets in defense of immigrants, and fight for an alternative based on the principle of putting the needs of Greek and European workers before profit.

Marxists have long argued that fascism is a poisonous outgrowth of capitalist economic crisis and failure. Defeating the fascist threat will require challenging a system that causes suffering on such a massive scale – and replacing it with one based on equality, participatory democracy and hope. •

Shaun Harkin is a member of *International Socialist Review* editorial board and regular contributor to [Socialist Worker](#), where this article first appeared.

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