

Social Crisis in Greece: The Plight of The Refugees

Greek Lessons from Below: Learning from the Refugees and Questions for the Left

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Axmed, a Somalian refugee, has been stuck in Athens for over six years. This is common for most of his friends, as without papers they are stuck. Getting out by themselves requires money for false papers and travel that is beyond them. Axmed told us that he had a brother in Italy waiting for him. Most of his friends had families and friends waiting for them. But not in Greece. They were stuck.

Life without papers has changed in the last five years. Earlier, before austerity and recession struck, most of the refugees could find work with wages. Without papers they were inevitably highly exploitable and many were. But now there is virtually no work with wages. On top of this terror of having no income to live, they now have to contend with the Greek state and its police force. "They are making war against us".

The war is largely conducted in the streets and in the police stations. All are sites of sustained violence by the police against the refugees. The stories are legion. Last week for example, Toufik arrived in Athens from Crete where he had been living and working for six years. He is a skilled plumber. But for the last 6 months he had not been paid at all. So he robbed the house of his boss and unfortunately for Toufik he was caught on a hidden camera in the house which led to his arrest 2 days later. Once in the police station he was systematically beaten for 5 days by a group of policemen. Throughout the beatings he was made to sit in a chair and wear a police helmet to protect his head. They wanted Toufik to tell them where the money was that he had stolen. He held out for 5 days before he told them. Once he had yielded to their violence they let him out. No charges but with the clear instruction that he had to leave Crete immediately or they would catch him again and this time kill him. He left. The police kept the cash. It is a common place story.

As it happens another refugee arrived from Crete just 3 days ago. He too is carrying serious wounds from a police beating. Walid, who is 25 years old was caught shop lifting for food. In the police station the police took a baseball bat and smashed his testicles. He too was then released and told to leave Crete immediately or suffer more. Walid needs urgent medical care which is now being organised and paid for by the refugees in Athens.

If you fight back the consequences are dire. Axmed from Somalia told us how he was set upon by 2 policemen whilst he was walking home. He hit back – in boxing mode he said – and landed a punch on one of the police. For this he was charged and sentenced to 12 years and 6 months in jail. Long and punitive sentences are routinely imposed far in excess of any other groups in the population. We were told of one instance where a refugee was given 25

years for fighting back. It was extraordinary to find so many refugees in this central part of Athens who were on parole and were expected on their early release from prison to report weekly to the police. The parole lasts usually for 3 years. During this time they are not allowed to leave Greece.

But it is not just the physical violence that overshadows their lives. It is also the extent to which they are routinely messed around. Axmed for example is from Somalia and is black. We met him in a cafe about 5 blocks away from his home, which he shared with 14 other people including his wife whom he had married a year earlier. She was pregnant and their baby was due in 5 months. He told us that there was an 80% chance of him being picked up by the police on his way home from our meeting. In the event he wasn't but later that day they took him. Ironically, it was Sofiane who was picked up as we left the bar. One minute we are walking back to the hotel and the next there is a police car with 2 police inside demanding that Sofiane come with them. They refused to take us both. Sofiane has papers and 30 minutes later he was back. He forced them to apologise. They claimed that he looked like someone they were chasing for breaking out of the police cells. This is life on the streets for the refugees.

But back to Axmed. Being a black African means that he is an easy target for the police. The routine is well established. They are taken out of the city centre to the police station that deals with all refugees where their papers are checked. If they are in order they are then let out to make their own way back into the centre. The length of time in the station is usually about 3 hours but it can be for much longer. It is very common for them to be held until after midnight and to be released when there is no public transport back to the town centre, which results in a long walk back. Last week Axmed was picked up 3 times in one day. On his release he took the bus back to Omonia Square where he was immediately apprehended and taken back. There the police asked him what he was doing back and told him to go. And the same thing happened again. As soon as he stepped off the bus he was picked up.

For those whose papers are not in order, or who simply don't have any, the outcome is dire for they are incarcerated in police cells – not a prison – for up to 9 months. There is no court hearing or similar due process. These police cells were designed to hold people usually overnight or for 2 days at the most. Not only are they massively overcrowded but there are no facilities for exercise; the windows, if they exist are set high in the walls so they see nothing outside. Foam mattresses cover the floor and washing and toilet areas are wholly inadequate for the numbers detained. The food is minimal, often just one simple meal a day, with no fixed routine so it can be after midnight when they get any food at all. Health needs are completely ignored. These places are as near as you can get to hell. At the time of our meetings, there were hunger strikes in four of the main police stations where refugees are incarcerated. It is little wonder then, as one Kurdish refugee told us, that so many of his friends, without papers, spend their days in their homes, rarely going out and living “like rats in their holes”.

If you sit for any length of time in this central area you can't fail to see the police buses carting off refugees to this police station. Just as you will see in certain streets groups of up to 30 refugees sitting on the side walk waiting for the transport. According to the refugees we met the police are paid 7 euros for each refugee they bring in.

This might be good business for the police but as Axmed told us, for the refugees it means constant hassle and a deep feeling of insecurity. For him, he said, he could honestly state

that he had never had one moment of relaxation in all the years he had been in Greece. He feels completely unsafe and vulnerable. Moreover, he said, like all other refugees, he lives in a state of shock as he never thought Europe would be like this; so cruel and inhumane, so full of corruption and violence, and where he can be so easily abused with impunity. He left his home and family to seek a place where he could work and breathe freely. Which would allow him to help his parents and family, who now live in very hard circumstances in Saudi Arabia. But now he rarely has contact with them for he feels ashamed to admit to them the full horror of his situation. He did not come to Europe to become rich he told us. He just wanted to get by and to be a human being.

Hustling to Survive

“You hustle to survive and you never know what each day will bring”. In the case of Axmed he could, some times, get a little money from helping other refugees find a place to stay and odd jobs helping out. As with many of the refugees we met, Axmed was fluent in many languages including English, Greek, Arabic, French and Turkish. In most of them he could write as well speak the language which has enabled him to pick up some translation work. Even though many of the refugees are confined to what can only be described as ‘shit jobs’ (when they can get them) this disguises their many skills and talents which they never get a chance to use.

Hustling to survive has many dimensions, one of which is knowing where there might be resources of support. This includes knowing of the refugee medical centres where they can receive medical attention from caring doctors and other staff; likely places where they might be lucky to find some work, get food and so on. The depth of communication between them is impressive as they tell one another what is available, where the police are congregating and hassling on the streets and generally helping one another out. These are communities with a lot of information which is vital to their survival. And much of it is shared.

It was against this background that we asked about support from NGO refugee groups, from the progressive political parties, from anti-racist/fascist groups and similar. What we wanted to know was how such organisations help them survive.

Nothing. This was the answer we got from Axmed and his friends. It was the answer we were to hear every time. These groups were simply not part of the battleground of daily life. They had no profile. They were not thought about. They were not part of their survival.

There were very few exceptions. One Moroccan from Crete spoke of the help and the solidarity he had experienced from the anti racist movement in Chania, especially in getting a room and some food when he first arrived. We also heard from a few others that in Patras there were anti racist organisations that were helpful in terms of practical assistance and also in terms of Greek language classes. A high priority is given to languages by the refugees. If you can’t speak Greek, we were told repeatedly, you are even more vulnerable, especially as the police are particularly violent towards non Greek speakers. Moreover, without Greek you have no idea what the police and other state officials are saying or writing about you. Rarely are documents and charges translated with the consequence that refugees are being forced to sign statements without knowing what it is they are signing.

So learning Greek is a high priority and the school in Exarcheia run by the Network of Social Support to Immigrants and Refugees is one of the places which is highly regarded and well known in the refugee community for its excellent work in language teaching. But the

refugees themselves also spend much time passing on their language skills to one another, especially English. We had some sense of this when we left the home of 3 young Algerians with one of them pushing another to do his English homework and that he should be expected to be tested later that evening on what he had learnt.

But in terms of practical assistance from 'outside' the stories were dismal. Hama, from Iraq, told us of a food centre that he had visited but never returned to as it was too humiliating. His friends also added that some of the organisations are as bureaucratic as the state and want to see papers, or even issue papers that then needed to be stamped here and there as a condition of receiving help. But the more common response is that what little help on offer is either not appropriate or not timely. One Somalian woman, Haweeyo, told us how she was given the name of a doctor and a lawyer who could help her brother who had fallen to heroin addiction and was in a bad state. After many attempts she made contact and the doctor promised to call back and come and visit. The call never came. Neither did the visit. That her brother recovered was due to the help he received from other refugees who over a period of a month weaned him off heroin, and watched him closely even to the extent of tying him to his chair when he was at the worst point in his detoxification.

As Nasim from Syria told us, many of their needs are pressing. "We live in a big prison" where each day is about survival. Greeks, he told us, are "good at talking but this does not keep us from hunger, it does not protect us from the police. It is what you do that matters and not what you say".

Where is the Left?

The fact that many of the NGO groups are ineffective as far as the survival of the refugees is concerned is not so surprising. There is more than enough written about the compromises that NGOs make in order to function and receive funding that tend to ally them with the power systems which are so merciless and unrelenting in scapegoating refugees.

But the absence of the 'Left' in all its various guises and fragments poses more profound questions. Whilst many of the refugees we spoke with did not frame their experiences in the language of left politics and theory, it was very clear that they have a profound understanding of the barbarities of capitalism and the state. They were completely unanimous in rejecting any suggestion that they were living in a society that was remotely democratic – even though they are told endlessly that Greece is the birthplace of democracy. They were as one in rejecting a system that equated money to humanity and societies which judged you as being nothing if you had nothing. As Toufik told us, in this system if you have no money you don't exist; if you don't have the right papers you don't exist; it is a society which is continuously judgemental on things that don't matter, such as the clothes you wear, the car you drive, the phone you use. None of this matters he told us, compared to who you were, how you thought, how you were with people. His friend, Mohammed, went further saying that there are rich histories which are rarely discussed now, where societies did not function like this, which were based on humanity and solidarity and which achieved beautiful things. It does not need to be like this, he said, and repeated what we heard many times, that the system today was no more than a giant prison which tries to crush all such feelings of humanity and solidarity. This system, he concluded, was just ugly.

Most of these insights come not from studying or reading but from living, from the streets, and from each other. They are given added weight because their very survival is rooted in a quite contrary set of values and behaviour. Without mutuality, without solidarity, they could

not live. Huge status is accorded to those with 'good hearts' and 'clean hearts'. These are the people you trust and to whom you turn to. Most of the refugees live collectively. They cook together, laugh together and talk. Many don't have enough food but they survive because in the course of a week someone in the household will have something which enables them to buy and cook some food. If you have you give, knowing that this is what everyone does. Just as in the refugee camps in the West Bank the humanity amongst and within the refugee communities is both beautiful to behold and awesome. It is the bed rock of their resistance and their determination to survive as human beings.

With or without a background in Marxist and socialist theory, the lived experiences of the refugees has made many revolutionary. As they freely acknowledge, their futures will not change unless this barbarous system is destroyed and replaced by a system that places humanity and justice at its centre. For them reformism is a complete no brainer unless the system changes. This is why they are so sceptical about the current debates taking place in Greece as to the implementation of race hatred legislation. Unless that legislation eradicates the impunity of the police and the legal system to beat them up and incarcerate them without reason then it will change nothing. Are they anticipating good things should Syriza come to power at the next general election? The answer is the same. No, not unless they fundamentally break with the existing system.

It is not just that the system benefits the rich and powerful and brutalises the weak and the poor, which is the problem. For many we talked with it is the way in which the system endlessly divides people and turns them against one another that so troubles them. They despair of the damage done to peoples' minds by a system that poisons them with lies such as blaming refugees for the crisis in Greece and elsewhere.

These factors make the absence of the Left in these areas such a matter of concern. Do we on the Left suffer from some of the same characteristics which are so despised in the system. Do we too believe that refugees are not worthy of our solidarity and support, that they too are nothing? Why are we not standing shoulder to shoulder? Why are we not meeting them in their fought-for safe havens in the bars and cafés. Why are we not building the levels of trust together that are so vital to our struggle for justice? Why are we not taking note and learning from their survival and solidarities? Why is it we laud new forms of non monetary exchanges and relationships when they are created from our groups but never seem to recognise that this is a deeply embedded way of life for many who live on the margins of society and have been so for years? Why are not taking seriously their calls for a world based on humanity and exploring together what this means and how we can achieve it?

These are not simply questions for the Left in Greece but for most of the Left especially in Europe. Some of the most significant victories in the recent years have been achieved by the power of poor peoples' mobilisations, especially in parts of Latin America and south Asia. Yet for too long in Europe the Left has tended to ignore these groups believing that the road to socialism lies almost solely with an organised working class (employed in factories!). In a society such as Greece, where 65% of young people have no job the implications of such thinking are all too evident.

The current crisis is stimulating, many on the revolutionary Left to recognise that we need to rethink and to act differently. Like Panos Sotiris[i], we talk about the necessity of building new forms of struggle from below, and forging new alliances between those who have been abandoned by global finance capital and left to the mercy of increasingly violent and

vicious police forces who have been tooled up to wage war on the poorest.

But no matter what injunctions for new thinking and acting we on the Left make, we stand little chance of achieving much unless we start standing with and by the most oppressed. We must rid ourselves of our arrogance and be prepared to learn from the very people whom the capitalist system dismisses as having no worth and no humanity. From what we witness in Athens the refugees are more than prepared to wage this struggle but where are their partners?

[i] Panagiotis Sotiris 'Greek Crisis and the Left Response: 2 Essays' The Bullet,

Socialist Project, May 28, 2013.

Sofiane Ait Chalalet was born in Algeria and came to Greece as a refugee in 2006. He has subsequently married and now has the papers he needs to live in Europe without the persecution experienced by many of his friends. Chris Jones was born in England and worked for many years in higher education. Both Sofiane and Chris now live on the Greek island of Samos where they write and explore the impact of the crisis on the lives of the people here.

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