

ON DECEMBER'S 2008 REBELLION



With **the following**, we want to contribute to the debate about the forms of struggle of the working class, referring to the events of December 2008 rebellion that we experienced some years ago.

In December 2008, the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos, an anti-authoritarian 15-year-old student, by a cop, was the spark of one of the most important urban rebellions -among others- in the western world of the new millennium.

The factors that played the most crucial role to the burst of the revolt was firstly the fact that the assassination, an actual response to a (minor) attack on a police car, took place at Exarchia, a

historically anarchist neighborhood. Secondly, that Alexis was either vaguely or concretely identified by the anarchists as part of the anti-cop rebellious youth; as one of them. (Some years after the incident it was also publicly revealed that Alexis participated in an anarchist school student group). At that time, anarchists and anti-authoritarians were meeting their most radical and upcoming phase. Two years before, many young people, high school and university students joined the student movement against the government's plans to privatize the universities. Out of this struggle a considerable number of youths, university and high-school students radicalized and joined the anti-authoritarian milieu by participating in university occupations and violent clashes with the cops. For the first time, these massive riots and smashing of the buildings and stores took a great deal and were legitimized instead of being characterized as hooliganism or lumbenism by the riot movement. In the period intervened till Alexi's murder, all these people involved used to frequent Exarcheia daily and clashes with cops became a common sight with extreme aggression from both sides.

Reasonably, the first ones that responded to the murder and caused a stir were part of Exarchia's anti-authoritarian movement. In the early days, the anti-authoritarian milieu responded by organizing demonstrations and destroying banks, luxury shops and department stores. Meanwhile, in the early demonstrations that weekend, we could see around us students and young unemployed and precarious workers, as well as workers with stable jobs; that is, people who all together participated the previous period in other struggles such as the great primary teachers strike two years before or the student movement that we mentioned above. We are referring to us all, being part of the anti-capitalistic movement, to leftists, as well as to members of Syriza party who formed the present government. Only the communist party (KKE) was absent, although many of its young, especially school student members participated in the demonstrations. As soon as the party found out, it gave a directive for them to stay out of it.

Two days later on Monday morning, when the schools were open, a grand mass of non-politicized teenagers joined the streets. For the youth, the motives were sentimental at first: a young person just like them was murdered in cold blood. At that point, we have to consider that during all 20 years before Alexi's assassination the student movement was really strong. The occupations of the schools, which started as a form of struggle on an extensive scale in 1991 repeatedly taking place until 2006-7 coupled with the university student struggles, had contributed to creating a collective consciousness to the school students. These struggles assisted in constituting a subject that the society back then- 10 years ago- identified and accepted as

distinct. Their contribution to the 2008 rebellion was important because the demonstrations held around Greece and the violent, persistent attacks to the police stations (attacks in 45 cities in one day) benefited the rebellion in such a way that it acquired a spontaneous character and reached immense dimensions. Furious students were shouting that the state and the police are killing children. With the slogan “Alexis is one of us” made it clear that they could see themselves as a united entity threatened by the cop violence. That is evident if we take into consideration that a non-negligible number of the pupils taking part in the riots were at that time studying in private schools.

As the rebellion continued, in the aftermath, through the interaction and the relationships that the students had created since 2006-7 with the anti-authoritarians and the leftists, very soon raised other issues as well. Students were fed up with the intensification of work they had to do in schools and universities. They opposed the way the capitalist society force fed them a norm of social existence. This ideal model of a “good life” demanded a sacrifice of their free time, and vital force to educate themselves, while living with their parents and then getting a job, working like machines in order to be able to consume, and finally having children of their own in order to restart the circle.

Furthermore, there was a high percentage of immigrants that took part in the rebellion. Most of them were young second generation Albanian students, as well as precarious workers. There were also some immigrants from other nationalities. As for the Albanians, the Greek capitalist state did not legalize them, in order to use them as cheap and obedient labor power, severely exploiting them, despite the fact that they had been living in Greece for the last 20 years. Young Albanians were born or grew up and went to school in Greece, but they couldn't easily get a green card. They had to prove their «ability» to stay or work in the country every five years at most and of course they didn't have the right to vote. Their working conditions were the worst as far as wages and social security are concerned. But despite racism of both social and state origin, Albanians were quite well integrated and fitted in with the other rioters and went out to the streets.

Transit immigrants, mostly coming from Asia and Africa, were more oppressed than Albanians and isolated in their ethnic communities, thus more scared and distanced. They were constant victims of police brutality. So when two big occupations occurred near their neighborhoods, it was easier and safer for them to take part in the rebellion by raiding and looting.

So, to sum up what has been said so far, the fact that Alexis was an anarchist and his assassination happened in Exarchia, the anti-cop and hooligan culture of the youth, a long lasting tradition of school and universities occupations and the existence of students' communities shaped to some extent the events of December. Rioters used several practices in order to express their rage. As we have already mentioned, student protests and attacking police stations all over the country and conflicts between cops and rioters were an everyday occurrence. The rioters attacked and caused damage to banks and public buildings and also damaged and looted stores. The first occupations occurred in schools and universities. The occupants were anti-authoritarians or leftist university students who used the three occupations of the National Technical University, the University of Economics (ASOEE) and the Law School of Athens and they produced an anti-state(the anti-authoritarians) and anti-capitalist discourse. Later on, the central offices of the General Confederation of Labour of Greece (which from now on we will refer to as GSEE) were occupied by workers and occupations expanded to city halls and public buildings on the periphery. The occupations operated in general as bases of direct action and many of them at the suburbs as the foundation of the first people's assemblies and the subsequent "movement of the squares".

At this point, we will further elaborate on the occupations of public buildings, city halls, the people's assemblies and in particular about the occupation of the central offices of the GSEE. Firstly, we would like to clarify that the majority of the workers sympathized with the rebellion and disapproved of how the police acted. However, the assassination of Alexis didn't affect their existence as workers. His murder did not imply wage reduction or worse working conditions, therefore they could see this fact as an external incident. Nevertheless, workers from various sectors like education, construction, tourist and entertainment services, transportation and even media participated in the rebellion. Maybe there were some factory workers, but the specific numbers are unknown. There were also many older workers with more or less stable jobs, but they were rather a minority. The part of the working class that was present in the rebellion, **by political choice** decided to occupy GSEE and some city halls around Athens. In this way, this minority segment of workers signified its disposition to extend the movement to their workplaces and to the whole city, giving an additional context - a concrete class context- beyond the mere critique against the police and the repression. The initiative was taken by some members of the rank and file union of delivery drivers and couriers, who are mainly anti-authoritarians. In other words, it was the precarious workers who wanted to push the bureaucratic syndicalists for a strike. Hence, the occupation of GSEE, the city halls occupations, the creation of public

assemblies etc were political decisions of a proletarian minority. In fact, they did not express the authentic needs resulted from the actual problems of the workers. From this view point we believe we can approach realistically what happened and:

- A. We can perceive, to some extent, the reasons the rebellion did not expand in the workplaces
- B. We can, also, exclude from these reasons the weakness of the workers organizing in workplaces. To enforce this argument, we note that some time after the murder of Alexi's, a forceful struggle took place in the cleaning industry, a sector composed mainly of female immigrant workers. We are referring to the struggle that broke out when Kostantina Kuneva, the General Secretary of the Janitors Union (PEKOP-All Attica Union for Janitors and Home Service Personnel) was the victim of a deadly attack by goons of the bosses. It is important to underline as well that during the era of struggles against the austerity measures, the proletariat reacted mostly with strikes and some sporadic riots; not with a generalized insurrection.
- C. And, finally, we can understand that the December rebels did not constitute a relative surplus population. Except of the students, the rest of them were mainly workers, although temporary ones, members of rank and file unions, waiters, salespeople, media workers but, also, even anti-authoritarian teachers etc. In a few words, as it's already been said, waged workers who played a leading part in strikes and demonstrations also participated in that distant December 2008.

We will then refer to the background of the rebellion, in order to understand first the immediate attitude of the state towards it and second to enlighten in this way the subsequent implementation of a strict memorandum policy and the measures of devaluation of the proletarian labor power.

So, let's take a closer look at the social and historical background of December 2008 incidents: The rebellion took place at a time of global economic recession. Especially in relation to the Greek capitalist state, we note that the last 25 years it had to face the crisis of profitability of capital and the exploitation of the proletariat. The state tried this with continuous attacks on wages and the welfare state. Those attempts had only partial success, thanks to the tension of the struggles of the working class, which had constantly aggressive demands. During a couple of years before December 08 there were major strikes against insurance and education reform, although we can say that especially in education over the last 30 years there has been a constant

upheaval and refusal on the part of the workers to succumb to the demands of the Greek capitalist state. Corruption, patronage, the dismantling of public services and the terrible deterioration of the natural environment, ratified by the devastating fires that occurred in the summer of 2007, during which 67 people died, complete the setting in which the sweeping wind of the rebellion broke out. In the December of 2008, proletarians, school and university students, workers and the unemployed did not seem to be willing to discipline an increasingly underestimated, supervised and alienated life. Furthermore, the tension was pervasive all over the society, and not only among the students and the Exarchia community. The state, facing the crisis of legitimacy which occurred from the rebellion, was forced in the first place to tolerate the rebellion and not to activate its repressive mechanism. The state didn't choose to follow an explicitly brutal repressive strategy. It was afraid that this would disturb the social balance in an uncontrollable and harmful way for capital. Deploying the army for example (as being strongly recommended by many right-wing public figures) would probably mobilize a far bigger part of the society.

But, what is the role of the state in the capitalist society? There is a widespread impression that in general, a state's main concern is how to violently repress rebellions and social movements. We believe that the state is not just a tool of the ruling class. It is a totality of social relations destined to ensure capital's accumulation and not just capitalists' well-being or workers suffering. It bears the responsibility of managing, both the production, and the reproduction sphere, that is the reproduction of labour power. Of course, it is at the same time the object and result of class struggle. Therefore, the intensity of state repression also depends on the form the class struggle has taken at a particular moment and place. It depends on the dynamics of the movements and the contents they are developing.

As for the relation between the revolt and the memoranda, we claim that the implementation of memoranda was a punitive, exemplary and strategically crucial counterattack of the state to the undisciplined and disobedient proletariat that had to internalize the "realism" of reduced expectations. Of course this is only one dimension of the imposition of memoranda. Undoubtedly, the implementation of the austerity policies aiming at the devaluation of constant and variable capital has complicated causes that are not yet to be discussed in this workshop .

However, the events of December 2008, on the one hand sharpened class contradictions through the political involvement and radicalization of youth. On the other hand, they caused the

delegitimation of the government of New Democracy and thus it prevented the implementation of reforms, necessary for the capital. During the Great Recess, Greek capitalist state found itself in a position where it couldn't make reforms without facing strong social resistance and instability. Also, it couldn't avoid the financial impacts of the huge debt which were accelerated by the current global financial conjuncture. The only way out was to impose a fierce restructuring policy mediated by the intervention of IMF and the terrorism of public debt.

Concluding, we would like to express some final thoughts for debate:

- Regarding the periodization of the forms of working class struggle our analysis of December's revolt shows :The main cause of the December's rebellion in Greece was the murder of a young anti-authoritarian in the heart of the anti-authoritarian ghetto of Exarchia. Would the anti-authoritarian milieu have chosen a different way of reaction if the cops had committed the murder 30 years ago? Would their reaction not be the same, irrespective of the period of time at which the murder was committed? (Nevertheless, the extent of the rebellion, as it turned out, had social and political explanations.)
- People struggle when they are not individualized and divided, when they have already developed social relationships and have created communities. In this case, we are talking about the community of people in Exarchia, the students etc. The form of struggle they may choose may be the rebellion, it may be the strike or their alternation/combination of the two, along with other forms. Can they get mobilized if they do not feel that what is happening is related to their situation and their needs?
- It is a well-known fact that the December rebels criticized wage labor and almost all forms of capitalism, but did not make specific demands. However, struggles without demands differ from one another. For example, in December's rebellion many rebels coming mainly from a political area, namely the anti-authoritarian, took part, and thus promoted radical features and left no room for the formulation of demands. Also, the school students that constituted a major part of the rebels couldn't be mediated by sterile bureaucratic organisations. The lack of demands gave several positive, consequent attributes to the movement. For example, it made it difficult for left parties and unions to

mediate the revolt and didn't give the state a direct way to negotiate with the rebels and assimilate their struggle. It also gave the possibility for generalization of violent and illegal practices (as there was not a direct goal to be achieved by collaborating with the institutions). Most importantly, it created a fertile ground for different parts of the proletariat to unite and partly overcome their socially structured roles and identities. Yet, there are some objections to be raised bearing in mind, both the aforementioned events and other struggles around the world that lacked demands: Can we claim that the absence of demands gives a rebellion a a priori more radical and threatening character than other means of struggle? Is it always that the absence of demands can lead to an overcoming of intra-class divisions? Is it true that it can, by default, give rise to the negation of commodity mediations? Can such practices not occur in more conventional types of struggles, too? Does the content of a struggle not play an important role, either with demands or not? Is the state always incapable of mitigating, at least in the long run, the conditions that led the masses to revolt and thus assimilate the movement? Well, just to give a hint about the last question, we have to say that, even the fairly radical, anti-repressive legacy of self-organized groups and communities, created after the December's rebellion, found themselves politically confused, in the face of a non-repressive left-wing policy, promoted by SYRIZA the first year after its election.

- Regarding the point of view that rioting shows that surplus populations have ascending significance within capital's antagonists what we want to address here is: The rebellion as a form of struggle for the proletariat has many and complex causes. What similarities would we have found between the rebellion in Syria, Gezi Park, Egypt, the French suburbs, and the December's rebellion? Can all these insurrections be perceived as the precarious' revolt riots? Of course, their underlying cause is obviously the capitalist way of organizing society, but is this reason enough to explain this form of struggle in every historical moment? And last but not least, if we want to interpret the 2008 rebellion as an insurrection of precarious workers, at a time when precariousness in Greece touched a very small group of workers (mainly the new entrants to the labor market) how can the current absence of rebellions be interpreted, now that the attack of the memoranda tends to generalize the precariousness of almost the entire working class?

underground tunnel, July 2017