



metro news from the ground up

RADICAL BOSTON

Report #7 from Athens

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by Gary Zabel (Advocate)

Tonight the streets belonged to the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). Well OK, that's an exaggeration. The streets in and around Syntagma Square belonged to it. Syntagma is where the Greek parliament is located. Whenever you read in the paper about "riots" in Athens, it's Syntagma Square they are talking about. The KKE has a long and sometimes heroic history. Like communist parties throughout Europe, it played the major role in the resistance against the German occupation. When World War II ended, the Party was immensely popular, and it was armed. It launched a revolutionary struggle for power but made the mistake of taking Stalin's advice and entering into peace talks with the British whose army occupied Greece. The talks were a ruse to get the KKE to abandon territory it already occupied and to give up its weapons. When it became clear that Churchill was hell-bent on eliminating the communists, the Party resumed the armed struggle, but it was too late. The British Army defeated the KKE forces, and installed a right-wing government that executed hundreds of communists. In 1967, Britain also rallied to the support of the quasi-fascist Colonel's Junta. The KKE, now illegal, struggled against the Junta, in particular through its influence on the labor and student movements. But it never recovered its former popularity. In 1958 it won 24% of the vote in national elections. In the most recent elections, it won only 5.5%. The KKE is probably the most doctrinaire communist party in the world today. It regards the fall of the Soviet regime as a reactionary counter-revolution, and accuses most other communist parties of bourgeois "revisionism." It has never supported or entered into an alliance with Syriza, seeing it as yet another pseudo-socialist party.

Tonight the Greek parliament was set to vote about whether to become, in effect, a colony of the Troika in order to prevent a bank collapse. The KKE-affiliated public employees union launched a 24-hour strike ending in a mass demonstration in Syntagma Square opposing the deal. The KKE's position has long been that Greece should abandon the euro. I arrived at the demonstration around 8:30 pm figuring that militant action was likely to occur near the time of the vote. I wasn't disappointed. A couple of thousand people were there of all ages, minus children. The unionists marched behind their own banners, and the youth organization of the KKE had a large and boisterous presence. I talked to a boy and a girl in their late teens who were members of the youth group about the events that were transpiring in parliament. They were emphatic in telling me that Syriza is a party for businessmen. It is not "with the people." I asked whether they saw a distinction between Tsipris' Syriza and the Left Platform. A majority of members of Syriza's central committee voted today with the Left Platform to oppose the bailout. The boy and girl weren't having any of it. The Left Platform is just as bad as Tsipris' faction. I didn't agree with them, but they are right about one thing. Syriza is a middle-class party. Many of its MPs are college professors. In contrast, the people at the KKE rally appeared to be overwhelmingly working class.

While engaged in conversation, we heard several explosions coming from the head of the march. The boy and girl left to join their comrades, but not before the boy told me that maybe I should go to the back of the march. "Be careful" he said. I ignored his advice and moved just a little bit closer to the front to see if I could catch a glimpse of what was happening. I saw smoke billowing toward the sky. It wasn't a bomb though. It was tear gas. The crowd began moving in the direction away from the tear gas cloud and I moved along with it. But fumes from the cloud moved faster than we did. The effect of the tear gas began with a terrible acrid odor, and then a sharp stinging pain in the eyes and nasal passages. People breathed through loose parts of their clothing, while some had surgical masks. There was even a gas mask or two. What I found most surprising though is the nonchalance with which the crowd moved, as though getting tear-gassed were the most natural thing in the world.

That's when I understood something. However the vote goes, the Greek saga is far from over. The Troika is playing with fire. I would go so far as to say that they may still win a few battles, but that they have already lost the war. Their arrogance, vindictiveness, and overt sadism are now apparent to all. They've driven a wedge between Northern and Southern Europe – Italy, Spain, Portugal, even France are getting in the Greek mood. From now on, whoever uses the words democracy and EU in the same sentence, except to deny their connection, will be laughed out of the room.

I later found out that the police used tear gas today in response to Molotov cocktails that seem to have been thrown at them by anarchists. In spite of the violence, the mood in Greece is not revolutionary, but it is one of resistance, even on the part of many people who hope that the bailout will pass. It's not just the KKE march that makes me think that. It's also the anarchists – very few of whom throw Molotov cocktails –, the rebels within Syriza, the alternative projects and free communities that have cropped up everywhere, from Exarcheia to the rural areas. Most of all, it is the overwhelming and

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Event Calendar

October

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

defiant No vote that Tsipris has now undone, but that still runs deep in the popular consciousness.

Longtime Open Media Boston contributor Gary Zabel is a professor of philosophy at UMass Boston - and most recently, the director of the division of political economy of the new online international graduate college The Global Center for Advanced Studies. He is visiting Greece for the college's founding conference, Democracy Rising, and will be sending a series of reports about his trip in his role as Our Man in Athens.


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