

Speech by Eurydice Bersi, Greece

(check against delivery)

Hello, I m here to talk to you about salami. The first slice were Greek civil servants. The last slice will be you. Let me explain.

Back in 2010, we were told that a 10% cut in public sector pay is no big deal after all, Greek state employees were to blame for the European debt crisis. Right... Then came a second pay cut, then a third and by now freshly appointed teachers living outside their home town are so impoverished that they were recently allowed to have meals at army barracks. Greece is not a third world country. The population is highly educated, life expectancy is 82 years for women and our public health care system, despite its deficiencies, has succeeded in keeping the population in good health. This is all changing so rapidly that s difficult for us to grasp, even though we see it every day.

Back to our salami, the second slice were employees at the private sector. Wait a minute... How does allowing even profitable businesses to slash salaries, how does sending labour rights back to the 19th century help overcome the crisis? It doesn't, but this is not the point. The point is redistribution, from the 99% to the 1%. The point is to turn the entire country into an investment opportunity, where wealthy investors (advised, incidentally, by investment banks) carve up whole sectors of the Greek economy at the cheapest possible price, and don't need to worry about labour costs, or zoning, or environmental regulations. Those of you who come from Eastern Europe might understand exactly what I mean. What happens when all incomes - public, private, pensions - fall? It's mathematically certain that the next victims will be shops and businesses. I invite you to come take a walk with me along Stadiou street, linking two central Athens squares, Syntagma and Omonoia, and count homeless people and shuttered shops. Nobody has any money to shop, but the solution we most recently heard from our creditors/government was to keep shops open on Sundays. Only large chains can afford to do this. Once again, the crisis benefiting the 1%.

The next slice is independent professionals, such as engineers, doctors, lawyers. A dentist I know says she now sits idle all day, her patients coming to her only when they are in deep pain. Construction activity has collapsed but lack of income is not the main problem for architects and engineers. The main problem is that their taxes and charges have, at the same time shot up so much that they are practically driven out of business. A friend of mine, a highly talented, very rational mechanical engineer was so frustrated at what is being done to him that he recently broke his hand hitting it against the wall. In the large neoliberal view of the world, there is no space for independent professionals, only for cheap, obedient employees.

At the moment, cheap is probably an exaggeration. Hundreds of thousands of Greeks are actually working with no pay whatsoever. They stay at their posts because if they quit, they will lose all hope that they will ever recover their money. That s a hostage crisis you wont hear too much about. We have come to the point in which a government minister suggested that the unemployed should start looking for businesses willing to hire them for free. Once upon a time they called this slavery. Unemployment was a little over 300.000 people at the start of the crisis. Its more than 1.300.000 people now. More than a million do not get any sort of unemployment benefit. What they do get, instead, are tax rises on the income they don't have. Honestly. Under this modern, rational troika-bureaucrat inspired policies it is not enough to tax the lower incomes to death. They now tax people without incomes, just on the basis that they own the flat they live in (or the car they would drive if they could pay for insurance and gasoline). But bathroom tiles are not

edible, so some municipalities have started bringing food at home to people too ashamed to show their faces at soup kitchens.

A Wall Street Journal editorial recently complained that this whole “tax insanity” is hurting business, by slightly rising taxes on profits. It fails to mention that the overall tax burden on large businesses (taxes on profits÷nds) is going down. Actually, the spirit of every tax law passed in Greece under the wise directions of the troika follows the mantra “the richer you are, the less you have to pay”. Our government hid for two years a list of rich holders of Swiss tax accounts, instead of taxing them as other governments did. Was the troika not aware of all this? They sure were, but looked the other way because, again, fairness is not the point of this exercise. If the Greek elite helps the big neoliberal insanity go forward, then it deserves to be protected.

The country has totally lost its sovereignty. I won't talk too much about the mind-boggling series of highly important laws being rushed through parliament fast-track, without discussion, or about Greece being forced to give up sovereign immunity rights against its creditors. I'll just tell you that every time my colleague who covers Greek economic policy gets a new document describing new taxes, new pension cuts, new restrictions on labour rights, new privatization goals, whatever, it is all in English.

A very useful tool to make this happen was the Euro. Just as getting into the Eurozone was a national goal worthy of hiring the most expensive Goldman Sachs make-up artists, so remaining inside is worthy of every imaginable sacrifice. We now have an aids epidemic among drug users, but at least they can buy their fixes in euros. European Unity is a noble goal but we are letting the 1% dictate its terms.

This is a crisis of redistribution and it is naïve to think the daylight robbery will stop in Greece, or in Spain, or in Portugal. The policies that have ruined us, and many other countries around the world before us, will simply move on to new victims. Private investors and European banks have used the past 3 years as an opportunity to get rid of Greek debt, while dumping it on the European taxpayers and the IMF. This means that the next round of Greek debt relief, already known as OSI (Official Sector Involvement) could involve a direct hit on German and other core European countries' pensions, health care, benefits. The seeds of division among European people are sown, while the system that makes Goldman Sachs prosper becomes ever stronger.

Please try to find out what is really going on. Please look around and see who profits from the crisis. Please help us stop the salami slicer before it completely ruins us. Not just because solidarity is a wonderful feeling. But also because you might just be the next in line.

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