

# The Greek Left and a Historic Opportunity: Fighting Golden Dawn

Tuesday 7 February 2017, by [PAPADATOS Dimosthenis](#), [PRINCIPE Catarina](#), [SOUVLIS George](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2015).

**The Greek left has a historic opportunity to marginalize fascists and address the needs of migrants.**

Contents

- [What about class composition?](#)
- [So what is an antifascist \(...\)](#)

After five months of negotiations between the Greek government and the European “institutions,” things may be finally boiling over. The dramatic situation has captured international headlines and perhaps overshadowed domestic efforts at reform by the Syriza government.

*Jacobin* recently sat down with Dimosthenis Papadatos, a Syriza central committee member, to talk about what the left government has done, in particular, to thwart the extreme right. We discussed the social polarization produced by the economic crisis and how it legitimized Golden Dawn, as well as Syriza’s efforts to transform key parts of the state apparatuses to diminish the far-right party’s power.

Finally, we discussed the outlines of the radical reforms implemented by the government on the crucial issue of immigration. The measures in this area have the potential to challenge the European Union’s cynical posture towards the migrant crisis, which has turned into a humanitarian disaster. Similarly, their efforts to counter Golden Dawn can have implications for the battle against the far right in Europe more broadly.

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**Catarina Príncipe and George Souvlis - While the neo-fascist and post-fascist far right is gaining momentum all over Europe, in Greece, the ongoing trial against Golden Dawn has almost disappeared from the public debate. Instead the crucial negotiations between Greece and the European “institutions” are monopolizing the current discussion. Is right-wing extremism, then, no longer a threat?**

Dimosthenis Papadatos - The Left can now act as the political protagonist in Greece, since it is the main actor against austerity and since the neo-Nazi crimes of Golden Dawn have been revealed [[1](#)].

In 2011, with the *indignados* occupying squares in Spain, the Left established itself in the movement against austerity. As long as Syriza continues the battle against austerity, the neo-Nazi threat will remain weak. But this role is not permanently guaranteed. This is not the end of Golden Dawn or the far right in Europe. It is crucial here to define the threat.

I am not among those who search for similarities between the present time and that of the Weimar Republic. But it is interesting to note that what is perceived as a threat today is still, as in those days, the capacity (or incapacity) of the far right to undermine the bourgeois democratic regime. That is not the real threat.

All over Europe, and in Greece as well, the far right is playing a political game, pretending to respect that regime while really undermining its rules — sometimes violently. Meanwhile the dominant European classes and political elites are playing with fire: cynically tolerating the pro-Nazi government in Ukraine, calling the far right of Finland [2] “euro skeptics” [3] (which is a euphemism), planning to start military action against refugees at its sea borders, taking the risk of continuing austerity in France and Greece, all despite the rise of Marine Le Pen in France and Greek neo-Nazism.

The recent absence of the European leaders from the annual celebration of victory over Nazism in Moscow [4] is one among various sonorous signs that the capitalist political elites do not recognize themselves any more as part of the postwar antifascist “social contract.” Today, the social alliances needed to tackle the crisis to the satisfaction of capital no longer contain the working class, its parties, or its organizations.

The substitute, for capital, is the de-classed workers, the ruined petit-bourgeois strata, and the movements of the post-fascist and neofascist far right (at least as an autonomous component). This is the social, sometimes anti-political, bloc of those defeated by austerity, who have no hope of changing their lives through collective anti-austerity or anticapitalist action, but are totally willing to orient the political debate and action towards a social darwinist, elitist, and chauvinist agenda.

It is on this basis that the far right forms its version of the “people,” a “people” that is the base for the traditional right as well. When you destroy all social bonds through austerity, the only way to put the pieces together again is the one that the far right suggests — and the one that political elites in Europe cynically adopt.

**How was this “game of fire” started in Greece? What is the historical and social context of the rise of fascist ideas and the extreme right in the country? Why and how did the far right grow and how was it legitimized by the “extreme center”? And how do moments of crisis polarize society?**

Until the end of 1980s, the far right in Greece was a marginal phenomenon mainly absorbed by the mainstream parties, especially New Democracy, or alternately, comprised divided and fragmented groups wielding little influence. If they did have influence, it was in circles nostalgic for the old authoritarian regimes (the dictatorship of 1974, the monarchy regime, and so on).

This was the reality until the end of 1980s. In the beginning of nineties there was a political chance for the far right in Greece, which came from the so-called national issues concerning the naming of the FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). The Greek church and then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonis Samaras led a mobilization of more than a million people in Greece declaring that “our name is our soul.”

This created an opportunity for the Right to act politically as a movement representing something

original. In the early nineties, because of the so-called national issues, especially around Macedonia, and with the church playing a more protagonistic role than New Democracy as a party, the Right had a chance to go to the street.

In the early nineties, for instance, before the Macedonian movement, there was a very strong student movement opposing the neoliberal government of New Democracy. A part of this very important movement was absorbed by the nationalist movement led by the church and Samaras. This was the first appearance of Golden Dawn, of movements further right than the traditional right, further right than New Democracy.

This was when the church became the main political expression of the opposition towards the center-left government, since the Left was still a minority and the party of New Democracy was still out of the play. It had a rhetoric of anti-globalization, anti-immigration, and a hardcore stance towards the national issues — the agenda that the post-fascist far right made its own through Laos (The Popular Orthodox Rally, a far-right solidarity party). So I am trying to describe the social and political context in which the far right in Greece changed its agenda.

It moved from a marginal and very minoritarian nostalgia of the authoritarian regimes of other decades to the culturalist and post-economist, post-materialist agenda of the 1990s and 2000s. When Georgios Karatzaferis founded Laos, he capitalized on this and made it the agenda of this party that was, by 2004, to the right of New Democracy.

For Laos and Karatzaferis, there were two key political moments. The first, the so-called right populist moment — I have many objections concerning the use of the term “populist” to describe the far right, but we’ll have to discuss it more later — it had to do with an anti-establishment rhetoric depicting the establishment as Jewish, as certain parts of capital as tied to the European Union in general. This despite the fact that Karatzaferis was a child of this political system for many decades.

Laos lost its populist, anti-establishment veneer in late 2008 with the riots that followed the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos. That was the period that Laos ramped up its rhetoric against the establishment and built a narrative concerning security, public order, anti-anarchism, and all these things.

On the one hand, Laos had a strategy to reject populism and don the clothes of responsibility. On the other hand, the extreme center wanted to counterattack the movement, searching for ways to legitimize itself and delegitimize the Greek European capitalist crisis. This is how the extreme center pulled the far right into the political center, creating an axis containing Pasok (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), New Democracy, and Laos. This was before the three-party coalition government and after the memorandum.

Pasok was brought into power by two forces, first from New Democracy’s ability to guarantee security, and second from the discontent of the people due to austerity. These were the circumstances that brought Pasok into power, and afterwards Laos became a pillar of the center-left government supporting the strategy of austerity.

This continued even more intensively after the memorandum. Laos voted for them and offered itself as a pillar of the new regime. In this three-party system comprising the extreme center, Laos was the extreme right of the center in a way.

This continued after the loss of legitimization of the ruling parties in Greece and the initiation, let’s say, of the strategy of responsibility on behalf of Laos and their participation in the three-party government of Lucas Papademos. After 2011 the consequences of the memorandum were clear [5],

and the main agenda for the political system and the media became security.

All this produced a great field of political opportunities for the neofascist Golden Dawn. Golden Dawn was cultivated in this field, the field of the post-2008 period. For me it was not only because of the economic crisis — and for me this is key — but also because of the counterrevolutionary strategy on behalf of the state concerning a) the anarchists and the movement and b) immigration and migrants, some of whom had participated in the 2008 riots. Golden Dawn became the executive of this counterrevolutionary strategy. The matrix was made possible by the Greek state. That was totally obvious after 2008.

When we talk about Golden Dawn, we are talking about an organization that at the end of the nineties moved together, not individually, to kill a leftist student, Dimitris Kousouris. There was a decision by the Supreme Court in Greece ruling that the actions of Golden Dawn were that of attempted murder. The case fit perfectly into the antiterrorist law we have here, a very well-known law concerning criminal organizations.

Despite the fact that we had this Supreme Court decision, despite the fact that Golden Dawn had openly attacked immigrants, anarchists, and leftists, etc., for many years its action was totally tolerated by the Greek state and its apparatuses. Everybody knew, nobody did anything. And this is why after the murder of Pavlos Physas and the arrest of the ruling nucleus of Golden Dawn, one of its members of parliament, Giorgos Germanis, went to the head offices of the police and said that they had to clean up all the police in order to catch the perpetrators.

He was depicting the reality, that even the internal secret police group of the 1990s, charged with searching for Periandros Androutsopoulos, was influenced by Golden Dawn. Periandros was known as the number two man in Golden Dawn, and this is why he avoided arrest for many years.

So there is a social basis, a social context, there is a political strategy, and there is of course an autonomous role played by Golden Dawn. In some circles on the Left, Golden Dawn and neo-Nazism are understood as instruments of capitalism, yet it is important for them to remain autonomous actors in order to persuade the average person, in order to build mass acceptance of their ideology. Without this autonomous element and without a convincing strategy, neo-Nazism is useless as an instrument of capitalism.

So there is autonomous violent action on behalf of the party, against certain parts of Greek society, attacks which are considered not only tolerable but even desirable. A part of Greek society desires such violence against leftists, against migrants, etc. It comes from a kind of mafia solidarity, rooted in economic activity and clientelistic practices. That's how Golden Dawn spread its influence.

After the murder of Physas, the state apparatuses moved against Golden Dawn, in the process reducing the number of attacks. It was enough to make a large part of society understand what Golden Dawn really stood for. Some of their offices closed because the pressure was intolerable. I think this is key to understanding what happened.

**Would you say anyway that moments of crisis polarize society? If yes, how? And who are the social bases of Golden Dawn today?**

Starting with the second question, the audience of Golden Dawn has two types. The first type is a radicalized right which was once absorbed into the clientelistic streams of the mainstream ruling parties but which has been radicalized again. The second type is the anticapitalist part of Greek society of the Right. The Right defines the capitalist system according to a cultural or political logic, while the Left does so from an economic logic.

Thus a certain part of the anti-memorandum and anticapitalist part of Greek society was attracted to Golden Dawn when they should belong to the Left. Then there are some with connections to the authoritarian regimes from before, and those are our existential opponents. It is naïve to believe that if the Left is more gentle to those people they will be persuaded to our side.

### **What about class composition?**

We don't have a concrete sociological analysis of Golden Dawn, but we know there are many unemployed persons there who should belong to the Left and who we would like to win back. That's why I think it is unrealistic for the Left to be a moderate one. If the Left does not have credible proposals against the capitalist system and the institutions, they will lose these people to the far right.

These unemployed youth have no experience of the authoritarian regimes of the past. These uneducated youth with no experience of the dictatorship or civil war go to Golden Dawn. They also have a base of those more socially secure people not harmed by the crisis, a more old-fashioned petit bourgeois social strata who seek a state of security, a hard state to impose not only law and order but the clientelistic strategy of earlier years.

It's comparable to what is happening in France. While there are serious differences between Le Pen and Michaliolakios (the Golden Dawn leader), you see the anticapitalist turn of Le Pen — one with petit bourgeois logic, but still anticapitalist — which seems to convince a great part of the working classes in France. At the same time the Left is absent from the suburbs, from the oppressed Muslim youth, from the fields of blue-collar work. The consequence of a Left absence in those fields is the growth of the far right.

Similarly Golden Dawn is comprised of unemployed young people with no experience of the authoritarian regimes of yesterday, an uneducated audience, combined with a more traditional petit-bourgeois strata who have lost out to globalization and yearn for a closed, secure state. A hard state that imposes law and order and the clientelistic practices of other years.

Since this is not realistic in the time of capitalist globalization, their only recourse is violence. This petit-bourgeois strata understands that as they are being squeezed by big property they must continue to be able to exploit immigrants and other parts of the new labor force. It is clear that such strata are opponents for the Left.

### **So what is an antifascist struggle today in the context of the left government?**

First of all it is not a propaganda struggle, it is concrete. Right now that means fighting for Golden Dawn to be defeated in their trial going on now. It is the first time after two decades that Golden Dawn is being named for what it is, a criminal organization with racist motivations. Unfortunately the Greek climate toward the trial is very temperate. We need an antifascist movement that will be present every day of the trial.

Golden Dawn is unbelievable in the parliament. They still oppose New Democracy, and their strategy there is to put on a moderate, innocent face. Even with the new government, there are still parts of the state apparatus with a tolerance for the crimes of Golden Dawn. This was the case with the attack in Chania, against a doctor who tried to intervene in order to protect immigrants from a Nazi attack. The police in that case did not consider racist motivations, and since the two main witnesses were undocumented they were not permitted to testify.

There is a long tradition of friendship or tolerance towards the far right which is embedded in the deep state, a strategy which is very authoritarian.

### **What are the changes in the structure of the police? What is the idea or role of the police in the framework of a left government?**

Unfortunately until now there were not interventions in the police, though it is long past due. We need a new strategy of the Left to redefine what is a crime. This involves defining the economy of the streets, the role of undocumented immigrants, administrative cases, begging, musicians on the streets, etc. In Greece, especially during the crisis, there has been a strategy of penalization of poverty directed at beggars, prisoners, HIV-positive people.

From 2010–12 there was a nightmare involving not only immigrants driven to concentration camps [6] but also HIV-positive people. There has to be a balance between such criminalization and suppression from one pole and from the other pole, social welfare. The Left's strategy must be to strengthen the second pole and to weaken the first.

In a left government we might have police but with another job description [7]. What is that job description? To chase big crime, organized crime, economic crime, even the drug trade — not chasing the small dealers but the ones in charge of big containers at the ports.

We have to re-politicize crime policy, because the result of years of the Right and social democrats has been the depoliticization of criminal policy and a strategy of suppression. Immigration, for instance, is not necessarily a law-and-order issue, it is a social and political issue. That is what is at stake in criminal policy.

### **We would like to discuss the immigration policies. What is your take on the detention camps? What are the limits of a fluid migration policy within the context of the European Union?**

The left government has inherited a nightmare from the old government concerning migration issues. There are four assumptions and four failures.

Assumption number one: that migration flows will be reduced when we erect the wall of northern Greece [8]. The migration simply moved to the islands and created a humanitarian crisis there, as there were no structures there to accept all those people. Greece has a perimeter of five thousand miles of sea zone. There is no way to guard all of it and send people back from there.

The Mediterranean has become a fucked-up mess, and it's naïve to say that if you put up a wall in northern Greece, that people fleeing for their lives from Syria will not come. After the wall was put up the migrant flows around the islands grew by 200 percent. This was the first failure.

The second failure had to do with the naiveté to believe that if you multiply the police controls such as Xenios Zeus and ethnic profiling, you would have less immigrants. What we saw after 2012 and Operation Xenios Zeus, which initiated ethnic profiling and massive arrests, was that out of hundreds of thousands of arrests only eight or nine persons were found without documents. It was a total failure if you consider that we estimate the number of undocumented immigrants to be around three or four hundred thousand.

The third unbelievable failure was the naiveté that if we send all these immigrants to concentration camps we will send a message to the EU or to the traffickers. What resulted in reality was even the police guarding these persons had problems of tuberculosis because of the unacceptable conditions of detention. And instead of admitting that they could not send these detained people back, they just

lengthened the period of detention.

Detention is mandated by the law as a last resort but it was used as the first. It created desperate conditions in the camps where people hung themselves, committed suicide, became ill, even the police started having health problems. The police even protested, saying that they were in danger because of the situation, that it was a total humanitarian crisis. Greece had to pay fines to the European court because of this total failure.

The fourth assumption that failed was that if we cracked down on immigration, Golden Dawn would be reduced. It was obviously a failed strategy but it was pursued because of pressure from the European Union. This came from Dublin II, which said that the country of a migrant's first entrance has to examine the demand for the asylum, but only under the conditions that that country is safe.

They wanted to make Greece an unsafe country to invalidate Dublin II, to say that if you want Greece to be the dog in the frontiers of Europe you have to pay and you have to share the burden. This was a crime calculated to make the lives of migrants a nightmare in order to help Greece negotiate with the European Union.

The left government is trying to chart a new path for asylum, saying two simple things: that we will improve the conditions of acceptance but the responsibilities must be shared. It's a matter of negotiation with the EU, which is incredibly hypocritical on the immigration issue.

From the one hand it extols human rights and levies fees and punishes when they are violated, from the other hand still it is okay with pushing the foreign poor out of his border. The old Greek governments didn't have a problem with this role, of being the dog at the borders, as long as they were paid.

We have a problem with this role because we have millions of refugees from Syria coming through the Mediterranean and we need to have a European strategy, a common strategy. There were the Syrian refugees here who were on hunger strike in December, and it was obvious we needed the activation of agreements in the European Union, we needed solidarity across the European Union, without which we would have no way to manage such massive flows.

If the EU is unwilling to commit to a strategy, because of the problem it poses to the leadership of what the rich should do with the poor during a crisis, to pay or not pay for them, then the left government will be pushed into continuing the policies of the old governments to oppress the immigrant population.

We will not do it. It's very difficult — as the weather gets better in Greece the conditions for the traffickers are better, but migration is not an issue of what traffickers want or not to do, it is a question of refugees doing what they must to survive. The islands are under incredible pressure from the Right, the media, and the political system, saying that opening the border means disaster. What we need urgently is two things: money for funding structures and European collaboration. Do not ask me what of the two is easier, they are both too difficult.

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**P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 6.11.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/06/golden-dawn-syriza-immigration-far-right/>

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## Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/greece-golden-dawn-mps-tried-criminal-offences>
- [2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/04/momentum-xenophobic-finland-150402101126751.html>
- [3] <https://global.britannica.com/topic/Euroskepticism#ref1196737>
- [4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11490770/Leaders-snub-of-Moscow-victory-parade-insult-to-soldiers-says-Russia.html>
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/13/world/europe/greeks-pessimistic-in-anti-austerity-protests.html>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/01/migrants-living-hell-greek-detention-medecins-sans-frontieres-scabies-tb>
- [7] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/greece-syriza-police-reform/>
- [8] <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/greece-to-build-anti-immigrant-border-fence/>