

Eric Ribellarsi

Young revolutionary members of SYRIZA interviewed

Published: June 2012 <http://links.org.au/node/2917>

June 18, 2012 -- [Winter Has Its End/Kasama Project](#), posted at [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) at the request of the author. It has been slightly abridged -- Eric Ribellarsi met with 10 young members of the Communist Organization of Greece (KOE), which is part of the Coalition of the Radical Left, SYRIZA. [The KOE comes out of the Maoist tradition and is the second-largest component of SYRIZA.] They discussed their backgrounds, experiences, the student movement, the orthodox Communist Party in Greece (KKE), revolutionary strategy and the political choices of revolutionary communists within the Greek crisis.



Photo by Eric Ribellarsi.

Young revolutionary members of SYRIZA interviewed

Can you tell me how some of you became communists? How did you come to join KOE?

Danae: I was involved with the anarchist movement. In 2006, I was a part of the student movement against the privatisation of education. It was massive, four hundred departments were occupied. I came to see the need for organisation and organised struggle, and I decided I would join KOE.

I had realised that in groups of anarchism, there is informal leadership. They informally lead, and it is not controlled. I realised that we needed leaders who were formal and acknowledged.

Eva: Growing up, my father was in Synaspismos, which made me think I didn't like communists. When I decided to join KOE, he would always lecture me about Stalin and Mao, and joke, "The Maoists are going to take you up in the mountains!"

I had attended a week long summer camp of KOE where we would speak all day about different political questions. And yes, we would have to wake at 8 am and work hard, but I thought to myself, "I like this. I wish the whole world could be like this."

I decided to join KOE.

So can you tell me a little bit about your work inside the universities?

Christos: We are a part of "Left Unity", a student coalition related to SYRIZA inside the student union. In Left Unity, there are all the parties of SYRIZA. It is a coalition for organising inside the universities. It is organisationally independent from SYRIZA, but politically related.

The way our universities work is that all students are members of the student union, but not all students are members of a student coalition in the union (like Left Unity or one of the coalitions of KKE, New Democracy, PASOK or ANTARSYA).

[**Note by Kasama editors:** KKE is the corrupt parliamentary mainstream party called the Communist Party of Greece -- it inherits the name of the influential post-WWII communist movement in Greece and it expresses its politics in the language of nostalgia and orthodoxy. New Democracy and PASOK are the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties. ANTARSYA is an a small, separate radical left political coalition that believes "anti-capitalist" unity is the necessary platform for this moment.]

We in KOE struggle for a common line in Left Unity that fights against the austerity memorandum, and we work to connect the struggle of the Greek society to the students.

Eva: In 2006, Greece had a successful student movement around public universities after attempts to privatise the public universities. The bourgeois parties said they would "raise the value of our degrees", but in practice they were lowering the quality of the knowledge and skills developed in the universities.

We had mass assemblies and occupations of the universities, and the police could not enter because of the determined resistance and because we have laws that prevent the police from entering the universities. We successfully stopped these privatisations from happening.

Then, in 2008, there was the death of Aleksandros, who was shot by the police. At that time, KOE made an analysis that this was the result of both a social and an economic crisis. [[Alexandros Grigoropoulos](#) was murdered by police, and a great upsurge of rebellion swept over Greek youth.]

After this point, we decided that the students of KOE would fight for the consciousness of the students to focus on the general political situation, and not on specifically the issues in the universities themselves.

If you wanted to be active, you have to fight against the International Monetary Fund. If you do not generalise the struggle, you will be isolated and crushed.

Danae: The government tried to divide us into little individual struggles and petty interest groups through the reforms they offered. At this time, the KKE and ANTARSYA chose to

attack us for not struggling over the direct student issues Meanwhile, PASOK and New Democracy got people to join their student union by having skiing trips, parties and dinners.

Eva: Unlike the other parties, we were active not just around elections, but around the political, social and economic struggle of the whole society.

Danae: Before some of the other parties in SYRIZA would only be active around the elections, but the situation has forced them to change as well.

You mentioned the general political struggle of the whole society. Could you tell me more about that?

John: We believe there is a general radicalisation happening in Greek society. There is a general radical movement that is not necessarily left or communist, they are not conscious of many questions, but they are radicalising.

Danae: Our first priority is to fight for a new, broad political front, much broader than SYRIZA. SYRIZA has to be in it, but this front must unite all of the struggles of the people.

John: Inside this front, we believe that people must agree on some key political questions. The main question is the overthrow of the special regime and that the Troika must leave. And it is not reducible to the elections. Everywhere we must target the European experiment. We have to win over the people who voted for PASOK when PASOK claimed to oppose the memorandum. This is principal focus of the KOE today. The youth of ANTARSYA and KKE refuse to acknowledge this.

You must fight in the reality of the Greek people.

Danae: We don't think this movement will itself produce a socialist revolution, but if you fight against the Troika and the special regime it can create a new situation for revolution.

John: These other parties just try to repeat the revolutions of Russia and the revolution in China. We believe that we must root our revolution in the central political problems of the Greek people. We are in a country that is not independent and that does not produce anything. There are no factories in this country.

Consciousness is not yet to the point of communist revolution. But it tends to be very radical.

Eva: In Greece, there is capitalism with special characteristics, the financial occupation and the political dictatorship of the regime over Greece. This is an imperialist-dependent country. They are using this policy to pass memorandums in all of the PIIGS countries.

[PIIGS means Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain.]

Today we fight for the independence, real democracy and the reconstruction of Greece.

We believe if we can implement these profound changes, we will be in a new situation for revolution. We don't believe you can bring about communism by merely saying communism and socialism a million times a day. This is what KKE and ANTARSYA do, they say communism and socialism with no analysis of Greek society.

SYRIZA must be made to fight for these three things, if we can do this, there can be a new break with the status quo. We will have a new situation in society, and can go from there.

Can you tell me a bit more about KKE? In the USA and some other places, people perceive that the KKE is a revolutionary party. Is there any truth to this?

Danae [laughing]: To everyone in Greece, it is so obvious the KKE is not a revolutionary party. The KKE has a material basis: it has many Greek newspapers and professional bureaucrats.

Vassilis: In each of the major upsurges in Greece, the Communist Party [KKE] refuses to partake. Since the overthrow of the fascist military junta in 1974, they have been aligned with the mainstream bourgeois parties. And it believes that all of the initiatives of the people must come from itself, from their party, not the actual initiatives of the people.

In the KKE program, there is mention of revolution, but in practice they fight against it. They fight against the people's struggles. In the elections, they are ambivalent to the struggle against the memorandum. They refuse to take part, and as a result they keep people from fighting against the memorandum.

Eva: Their flier for the elections centred on attacking SYRIZA.

Danae: We must understand that the KKE became this by becoming professional bureaucrats whose only purpose is to perpetuate their current condition in the society.

Their whole purpose has nothing to do with revolution, but to merely remain a small group in the left wing of the European parliament.

Eva: They have no faith in the people. And to the people that is obvious.

Danae: They are obsessed with purity. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were in the RDSLP [Russian Social Democratic Labor Party] with the Mensheviks, and the Bolsheviks were in the minority at that time.

The Bolsheviks were in the ideological leadership of the RDSLP.

KOE tries to be in the ideological leadership of SYRIZA, even though we are not the majority.

Vissilis: And we intend to do this through our reliance on the people and our connection to the people. The KKE has never broken with the 20th Congress of Communist Party of the Soviet Union which advocated peaceful co-existence between the communists and the capitalists. They imagine a peaceful transition to socialism.

This is why they have never taken part in any conflict or revolt in society. They want to peacefully grow until a future date where they can peacefully take power. This is what their slogan, "A strong KKE", means. We believe you must struggle, fight and influence the people.

Danae: “Dare to struggle, dare to win” — This slogan is KKE’s biggest enemy. If SYRIZA were to be destroyed right now, it would decimate the entire communist movement. You have to have the courage to be in it, and fight, and have faith in the people.

Eva: Synaspismos also had this view. But this has changed through the struggles in SYRIZA.

Danae: KKE’s view from the 20th century, of being vaulted into power through the trade unions, is a fantasy. The economic basis of society has changed.

Earlier you had mentioned KOE’s slogan, “Independence, real democracy and reconstruction”. Could you explain the reconstruction part of that slogan?

Danae: There are three levels to the reconstruction of Greek society. The three levels which this involves are political, economic and social.

The first is to take the Troika and all of their Greek political allies, and throw them out of Greece.

The second is the economic: We must stop paying all of the debt. At first, we will declare that all of the debt based on speculation is illegal. And then we will declare the whole of the debt to be illegal. Tactically, first we will start with a legal national committee that will research this debt, which can then play a role in the legalities of the international aspect.

Eva: We must restore the production of Greece. We will free Greece from the reliance on globalised imperialist markets. We must produce what we eat. We import everything at this time and this must stop. A country that produces its own food cannot be forced to obey and borrow from the debt of the imperialists.

Danae: The fight against debt also has two levels. One is production, restoring it will free us of these loans. The second is the political struggle to refuse to pay these loans.

Eva: The third aspect of reconstruction is the social aspect. Let me give an example: From 1968-1974, we had the Greek military dictatorship. After the change of the regime, there were right-wing governments until 1981. There was social turmoil after the fall of the dictatorship. This resulted in the rise of PASOK which had left rhetoric. It tried by every means they had to co-opt every resistance movement of the people.

PASOK represented the rise of a middle class politics in Greece. This created illusions about the politics and the bourgeois democratic system of representation. The general ideology was individualism and clientelism. Brokers would offer jobs to anyone who could get 50 people to vote for them in the parliament. It resulted in the total corruption of Greek society, and people were forced into these kinds of relationships.

Jobs were not the right of people, but gifts from the parliament. And the KKE and the Eurocommunists did not play the role that was necessary. In the 1950s the KKE had stopped being a revolutionary party. But it did have groups inside of it that played a different role. There were camps inside it, which the Greek Maoists came out of in the 1960s. The KKE went through hell and torture during the dictatorship, and then in the 1970s it became legalised and was immediately coopted. It accepted positions from the PASOK, was heralded

as heroes of resistance by the PASOK, and said this was a new epoch. The KKE moved to accept reforms and seats from the PASOK.

The communist movement was ripped apart at this time.

It became a movement of the past, not a fighting movement of the people. The values, loyalty and solidarity of the people to one another were shattered. The orthodox Communist Party was corrupt, not a role model in the society.

These values were taken apart, and replaced with capitalist individualism.

Today, however, the situation has changed, and these capitalists can't afford to give these bribes to people.

Danae: The KOE believes the people need new values: solidarity over individualism, dignity against corruption, emancipation over dependence.

This is a very hard struggle for us. It means the transformation of the people. It is why we take active part in things like giving health care to immigrants who are not legal. And we have been part of movements like "the Potato Movement", in which farmers in the north give free potatoes to people starving in the south. We were facilitators and activists in this. This is solidarity, not charity.

Eva: If we want the people to fight, we must also give them a life. It is a parallel struggle to the struggle in health. We fight in a social system for health, but we also fight for the doctors themselves to give free health care.

Danae: Or with the Resistance Festival, we provide a space where people don't have to pay much, and they can come and be a part of a new type of culture, new music and art, and be a part of engaging different movements that are happening.

Or we have places like this cooperative where people engage with one another in every way that they can. We have theatre performances, meetings of social movements, coffee and beer, football games and concerts. Every activity of the culture of the Greek people is welcome here. Our members are a part of football clubs where we bring Palestinian flags to the games against Israel. We have even started football clubs, because we think that there could be a different kind of sports.

[**Author's note:** Here, Danae is referring to the café/bar/community space we are sitting in, called @Roof. It is one of many such spaces that the KOE has formed throughout the country.]

Danae: Another major part of reconstruction is stopping emigration from Greece. The state pays massive amounts of money for the education of people in Greece, and then emigration from Greece they are forced to go to countries like Germany, where they produce few doctors and scientists, but hire them away from Greece. It is like a famous painting of Greece as a thousand birds taking flight.

Christine Lagarde claims that this form of oppression is the solution for Greece. That Latvia already had Greece's problem, and it solved it by 13% of Latvians emigrating away from Latvia.

Eva: In our city, Heraklion, KOE has about 50 representatives inside of the student union, and we are the largest group in the union.

We have used this position to host forums on students emigrating from Greece. Meanwhile, New Democracy hosts forums on how you can emigrate away from Greece.

Their posters feature pictures of people traveling away from Greece with the slogan "Let's go abroad!"

Reconstruction requires convincing the people to stay in Greece and to reject these corrupt offers. It means people will have to sacrifice personal gain to resolve the problems created by this crisis.

Eva: Meanwhile, all our relatives tell us to us to just go away to other countries. It is very hard to convince people to live on exchange economy and volunteer doctors.

Can you tell me about how you see the role of communists in Greece?

John: The lack of strategy among communists causes harm to the people and their ability to fight the political system. It is very important that in movements like Occupy Wall Street there are profound changes in the consciousness and politics of the people. The role of the communists is to bring consciousness and organisation to spontaneous mass movements such as this.

This is a basic point about how communists conceive of their actions. We must be in the spontaneous actions of the people, and not only be with ourselves or even in the things that only we believe. The way we will change things in society is acting with the masses, not shouting down at them with the things we personally believe. Things don't work the way KKE believes.

Eva: I would like to share an example. In 2010, when the IMF came to Greece, many struggles were organised, without real results. However, one year ago, after all these struggles, the people went to the squares, our "Occupy movement", KKE and ANTARSYA would always say before "you must be active". But when there was a major upsurge of the people, they refused to join.

Yet for all of their constant activism, they produce no actual new movement or consciousness or changes in society. But the Squares movement brought profound changes in society.

We believe communists should be in the squares, and to raise the political consciousness of the people above their spontaneous basic needs.

Danae: I'll give another example of KKE in the 1940s. In the 1940s, there was the most major political struggle of the history of Greece. The KKE played a major role at this time. They took the basic needs of food and the fight for freedom, and they lent organisation and a program to these basic needs. If today a communist says that we must fight for communism

and socialism and doesn't have anything to say about the special regime of Greece, it is like saying people will fight without anything to eat. Our principal political struggle must be against the Troika.

There's a Greek theorist, Dimitris Glinos, of the 1940s who said that if we wait for the circumstances that communists want, it is like cooperation with the enemy.

Danae: In 1995, we had a slogan around our decision to form a communist organisation. It was: "Transform the society and transform ourselves."