



300 immigrants fighting for lives in hunger strike

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Since 25th of January 300 immigrants in Athens and Thessaloniki have been on hunger strike. They have lived and worked in Greece for years and are calling for the legalization of their residence status. The first strikers have already been admitted to hospital. (1435 Words) - By Uli Herrmann

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An immigrant on hunger strike is transferred to an ambulance in Athens March 1, 2011. Photo: REUTERS/Yiorgos Karahalios

On the 25th of January 300 immigrants in Greece commenced open ended hunger strikes, which are still going on now. They are demanding legal residency, the government, however, is dealing with these hunger strikes using repressive measures. Greece is filling the role of the dogsbody to ensure the security of Europe, as giving in will not be tolerated by the more powerful EU nation states. The Dublin II agreement allowed immigrants who had managed to enter other EU states through Greece to be sent back to Greece. On the 21st January 2011, however, this practice was repealed by the European Court of Human Rights. Since then people are not allowed to be sent back to Greece and can apply for asylum in the country they are in. According to a report by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) the asylum acceptance rate in Greece stood at 0.1% in 2008 in comparison to a European average of 36.3%.

Dorothee Vakalis, who had been on the scene with the hunger strikers until shortly before this interview.

Up until now it has been almost impossible to learn anything about the collective strikes of 300 immigrants from the German media. When did the strikes begin?

Since the 25th of January I have been seeing agitation and disquiet on a daily basis on the website <http://hungerstrike300.espivblogs.net/> . That was the day that the 300 immigrants began their hunger strikes, 50 in Thessaloniki and 250 in Athens.

They arrived in groups from Crete, where they have lived and work for many years, some for more than ten years. Particularly in the agriculture industry the immigrants have been an army of cheap labour. Greek olives, oranges, asparagus, strawberries and feta cheese, things that people in Germany enjoy eating are the result of their labour. In the process their contribution to the economy in Greece, and the wider European economy has been ignored.

What are the conditions like now in Athens and Thessaloniki?

In Thessaloniki 50 people are being accommodated in the "labour organisation centre" in the centre of town. The management of the centre are supporting the strikes, along with many other organisations (doctors, lawyers, teachers, trade unions, artists, city council). A solidarity committee which includes doctors has pledged their support. Today is the 28th day and the health of the participants is getting significantly worse from day to day. Yesterday an emergency call was sent out to supporters "provide transport for the dangerously ill strikers to get them to hospital" - eight men are already in hospital.

And in Athens?

In Athens 250 people on hunger strike plus their supporters from the law faculty at the university were forcibly expelled, "with guns held to their necks," by the police. The university shelter has is historical significance in Greece as it was at this place that a large rebellion against the dictator (1967-74) began, and it led to his downfall. The violation of asylum rights has therefore also got an important meaning, as in this case it is immigrants and foreigners that are denied these rights.

Where are they now being accommodated in Athens?

In the dead of night the people on hunger strike were forced on foot, with brutal police violence, to go to a building, the YPATIA house. There rooms were opened that provided 50 places to sleep. The remaining rooms are still closed. Everyone else sleeps in tents in the yard. It rains, it is ice cold. It is a degrading, catastrophic state of affairs.

What has the state done, apart from the police operation and the provision of the YPATIA house, in relation to

the strikes?

The Greek government issued an ultimatum stating that the people on strike had until the 11/2/11 to stop the strike; otherwise they would be forcibly removed from the building and returned to their birth lands. All but one of the come from North Africa. The ultimatum came and government kept quiet and will not participate in any discussion. It is at a standstill. Who knows what directives they will receive from the EU.

What are the strikers' demands?

In their appeal from the 25th of January they demanded the legalisation of all immigrants and the same rights as all Greek employees. They are not just fighting for themselves and their families but for the rights of all women, children and men who are immigrants in Greece.

What is becoming clear through this hunger strike?

The Greek government has followed the programme of immigration with an absolute minimum of intervention and an uncertain future. They have created insecurity and exploitation. There are anywhere between 400,000 and 1,000,000 immigrants in Greece, a country with a population of only 10,000,000. These are people "without papers", without legal rights, without health insurance and above all without human rights who take part gracefully in the society they live in. Since 2005 almost no immigration papers have been granted, the acceptance rate sits at 0.1%, an unbelievably low figure. Xenophobia, insecurity and fear were imparted into the population, particularly by those who profited from the situation.

What consequences did the "Dublin II" agreement have?

Since this agreement in 2003 the EU has passed responsibility for international refugee protection to the EU border states and even to states outside the EU's borders (Libya, Algeria, Turkey, Morocco).

Germany misused its geographical position and left the care and protection that immigrants and refugees need to others. The decision from Strasbourg from the European Court of Human Rights on the 21st January 2011 and the new regulations coming from the German Home Office show that Dublin II is crumbling. No one is allowed to be expelled to Greece anymore.

Do you have any examples of people being sent back to Greece?

Yes, including a family from Iran with two small children. They arrived in north Germany and lived there for many years. The man worked, the children went to nursery and were learning German well, and they had built

up a helpful network. Then one day they were expelled to Thessaloniki. A social worker called me from Germany so that we could become involved. Our evangelical parish was occasionally called upon in deportation cases because of the common German language, which many immigrants could speak well. Again and again I experience how traumatised and confused these people were, people who had risked their lives to get here.

What do you think must change in the EU?

The EU must come up with a new way of cooperating across Europe about access and acceptance for immigrants. It must form a foundation on based on the Geneva Refugee Convention and the Human Rights Charter. People's lives are at risk here. Everyone feels the need to make fear driving speeches about the "boat being full" but with open discussion, statistics and a human rights moral ethic this could be reversed.

The refugees' council in Bavaria was the first to support the strikes in Greece. What message do they send to Greece?

Legalise all immigrants and thereby send us a sign from Europe. Immigration is not a threat - immigrants are a social reality and provide a worthwhile contribution to the economy, the culture and to maintain an emancipated, just, democratic society.

Any closing words?

I hope and pray that no more people come to harm during this strike. The crucial times are still ahead of us. The people who are striking, along with all people "without paper" are a pressing call on our sense of justice. We should show solidarity with immigrants. Instead of closing the borders further [German Asylum campaign group] Pro Asyl is demanding an immediate programme in Germany and other European states to support the immigrants in Greece...

A common European solution for the protection of immigrants is necessary. A teacher in Thessaloniki said to me, "Our grandparents were refugees from Asia Minor, our parents emigrated to Germany for work, we will not let ourselves become racists."

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