

The Social Clinic of Solidarity Thessaloniki needs your support

In early November 2011, the Social Clinic of Solidarity in Thessaloniki (SCS) opened its doors. The project aims to provide health care to the ever-growing part of the city's population who, as a result of severe cuts to public spending, are unable to afford medical care and treatment in hospitals or other care facilities. We interviewed Serafia Kalamitsou (37), a pediatrician and anarchist activist who has been working with SCS since its inception.

Please find details at the end of the interview. The interview was conducted by Ralf Dreis and published originally in Graswurzelrevolution 373.

Ralf Dreis (RD): Hi Serafia. To begin with, could you please say a few words about the current situation in Greece, and then explain who came up with the idea to establish the Social Clinic of Solidarity and how you implemented it?

Serafia Kalamitsou (SK): Hi Ralf. I'll focus on the state of affairs in the health care system, since with SCS we are primarily targeting problems in this area – although of course, by necessity, we are dealing with larger social issues as well. It is important to note that the health care sector was in trouble long before the economic crisis hit. Since then, the situation has deteriorated consistently and now affects many more people. But even before the crisis there were many people who had no access to health care, or there were people who sought treatment and who were treated with hostility or had to pay extra fees, often 'under the table'. Our group convened in February 2011, when we gathered to support 300 immigrants who were on hunger strike to fight for a legal status in Greece. Fifty of the hunger strikers had been placed in Thessaloniki's Workers' Center and contacted health care

professionals for help. In response, several physicians, nurses and physical therapists, many of them anarchist, antiauthoritarian or left activists, founded a clinic of solidarity in the Workers' Center to provide medical assistance to the hunger strikers. Many of the refugees had already lived in Greece for many years without a legal status, they had filed numerous claims and paid a lot of money to state authorities in order to receive papers. Eventually, their only option was to go on hunger strike to fight for their rights. After the hunger strike, and fueled by the enthusiasm over our successful cooperation beyond the work in the clinic, our group decided to build a Social Clinic for Refugees in our city.

RD: So in the beginning you thought about a clinic for refugees only.

SK: Yes, although we decided very quickly to include everyone without health insurance, i.e. immigrants and local Greek people. While we were still discussing our plans and debated how to implement them, the requirements imposed by IWF, European Commission

and the European Central Bank hit Greek society. The number of people without insurance grew exponentially, and by now more than half of our patients are local Greeks. First we approached the city, asking that they allow us to use one of the many uninhabited buildings, but the people in charge responded with a range of cheap excuses. Then we tried to rent rooms, but we didn't have enough money to do that. We even discussed to squat a building, but many in the groups rejected that idea because it could have put people without legal papers in danger or scared them away. Eventually we made an agreement with the Workers' Center who offered space on the first floor of the building on Aisó pou Street 24, and this is where we are operating now. The Center also pays for electricity, which means that our major expenses are for vaccines and dentures, amounting to about 5,000 Euro per month. We receive most of our medicine and bandaging materials from individuals who went through their medical supplies at home and donate whatever they can spare.

RD: Could you tell us how many people are involved in SCS and what were the next steps?

SK: In the beginning, during the hunger strike, there were thirty of us. More people joined our discussions during the planning stage, and by now there are approximately 200 health care professionals who participate in SCS. In addition there are a number of doctors who have their own practice and who would like to join, but there are scheduling conflicts between their own

hours and our schedule. These doctors admit two or five or ten patients per month in their own practice. SCS includes different departments, including general care, dental care, physical therapy, pediatric care, and the social pharmacy, where people get their medicine free of charge. There is also administrative staff organizing the clinic, without them the project would not function.

RD: Do you check whether your patients have health insurance?

SK: No, we don't want to check on people. We have stated clearly and publicly that we don't want – and are also not able to – replace the state health care system. We will not attempt to become a substitute ministry of health. Our clinic is available to everyone who has been pushed out from the capitalist system, to everyone who has been kicked out of hospitals and health care facilities and doesn't get treatment anywhere else. We have no intention to exist forever, but we try to provide the political and social conditions for equal and all-encompassing access to health care so that nobody is excluded from medical treatment in the hospitals. We can only provide basic care, but as soon as a person needs surgery or an MRI, they need to go to a hospital. Therefore it is imperative to fight for free health care for everyone, whether they have health insurance or not.

RD: Is the SCS open every day?

SK: We are open every day except Sunday.

RD: So there is high demand for the clinic's services.

SK: In the beginning there were only a few departments, but by now there is a growing need for more specialized treatments, we need more doctors who can take over shifts at the clinic, and our space is too small. In addition, during the winter there will be many more people without health insurance who will come to SCS.

RD: There are many people in Germany who are very interested in the work of SCS. I would think that most of them consider your project to be a charity. Do you think of yourself in that way?

SK: There are many different kinds of social clinics in Greece. We call ourselves "Social Clinic of Solidarity," but I personally often prefer "Solidary Clinic" because that identifies more clearly what we do. There are clinics like ours that are self-organized and self-administered, not run by an NGO or the church. On the other hand there are social clinics that provide charitable services and that are run by NGOs, the church, or physicians' associations, and there is also the Nazi propaganda by Chrysí Avgí (Golden Dawn) that has announced "Social Clinics for Greeks only". In reality this is only propaganda, because this Nazi party is incapable of setting up such projects. One of their so-called social clinics was supposed to open in Xánthi in North Greece, but really there is only a fascist military doctor who has never treated a single patient.

RD: On September 13 daily newspapers

reported that Chrysí Avgí called for a "blood donation drive for Greek people only."

SK: Yes, that is correct, but again, this is Nazi propaganda by Chrysí Avgí with which they want to prove that they care for the Greek people. Comrades from Athens reported that only ten to twelve Nazis showed up to donate blood. Also, medical ethical code prescribes that blood can only be donated and must not be sold, and that blood is provided to whoever needs it solely based on medical criteria. It is ridiculous and unscientific to call for Greek blood for Greek patients or German blood for Germans. It is disgusting and scandalous that the state authority in charge indeed responded to Chrysí Avgí's request and provided a blood donation unit for the campaign. The Confederation of Hospital Physicians and the Greek Association of Physicians, however, both sharply denounced the racist blood donation drive in public statements.

RD: Let's return to your group and to your goals as a clinic of solidarity. You have a larger objective than providing basic medical care to people who have no health insurance.

SK: We did not start the project to save our souls through welfare, but ours is a political project with a clear vision. Our main goal as SCS is to show that networks of mutual solidarity do work and that it is possible, through organizing based on principles of solidarity, to overcome the big problems that emerged because of the economic crisis. Solidarity here means more than to extend a helping hand. Solidarity can

make an impact only if and when solidarity is adopted consciously as a guiding principle of behavior, by our patients, by their families, and by the residents of their neighborhoods. Through that it will become obvious that networks of solidarity can function not only with regard to health care, but in all aspects of our lives. It is very difficult to accomplish this form of consciousness raising, but if our success is limited to establishing a working clinic, our work was in vain. We are only successful when we manage to turn SCS into one element of a general movement aimed at social self-government and solidarity in the city and in the whole country.

RD: There are a number of self-organized networks in Thessaloniki. Do these groups coordinate their work with each other? Do you publish texts produced collaboratively or shared analyses? Do you organize events or demonstrations together with other projects such as the social center Mikrópolis or the squatters of the former military base in the west of the city who formed the collective “PerKa” to grow vegetables? Are you in touch with any of the squats?

SK: We have not issued any political statements authored by multiple groups yet, but we do attend the assemblies of other groups, or people from other projects join our meetings. The project Mikrópolis supports our work financially on a monthly basis. We are currently trying to build a network with other antifascist and antiracist groups in town. So far we did not succeed in establishing an organized network, but there are

many informal connections and collaborations among the different groups.

RD: When you discuss such forms of collaboration or decide upon political campaigns, who makes the final decisions?

SK: SCS is self-organized and all decisions are taken by the general assembly. Everyone is invited to attend these assemblies. Unfortunately, not everyone does attend and in most cases there are between forty and sixty activists who make the decisions. Many prefer actual work to the discussions at the general assembly. Personally, I think it is very important to collectively develop our position on certain issues and to reach decisions.

RD: How do the state and mass media respond to your project?

SK: We consistently try to insert clearly antiracist positions into the public discourse and publish our texts in many different languages all over town. Because of that, SCS is fairly well known and many people support it. This is one reason why we are currently largely protected from state assaults.

Mass media outlets play their own game. Of course they don't publish anti-capitalist or antiracist positions but want to highlight our charitable work. Therefore we are very cautious in dealing with mass media. We are simply afraid that they would present our work and goals in the wrong way and, eventually, present the project as a kind of substitute church or NGO.

RD: We've talked about the fascist bands of Chrysí Avgí. A project like SCS must be a prime target for attacks by the Nazis, isn't it?

SK: There is of course a danger, especially since the neighborhood where we work is home for many immigrants, and Chrysí Avgí also has their headquarter there. We are definitely concerned about potential attacks on our patients by the Nazis or even ourselves when we leave the clinic late at night. Luckily, so far nothing has happened. And in addition to the personal and more informal connections between different projects that we have already talked about, there is an antifascist emergency phone chain that we can use to call each other and mobilize help.

RD: Earlier in this interview we discussed your expenses and how you cover them. How can people in Germany, who would like to show their solidarity, support you in your struggle against the capitalist barbarity?

SK: (laughs) Well, the obvious thing to do of course is financial aid. We always need money, and as I said earlier, there are things we need to buy, such as dentures, dental fillings, and vaccines for children, among others, and all of this is very expensive. For instance, children without health insurance will not receive vaccinations free of charge, which means that they don't get vaccinated. To enroll in elementary school, however, children have to document that they received all vaccinations. Parents who don't have enough money to feed their children

simply can't afford to buy the very expensive vaccinations. The Greek government abandoned such obligations toward its own citizens. With the backing of mass media and fueled by racist propaganda, this contributes to the growing popularity of the Nazis. So far we receive financial support from workers' groups, associations, fund raising events, individuals, or other projects such as Mikrópolis. But this is not enough, and since the situation is only going to get worse, we would highly welcome the support from comrades in Germany. In addition, physicians could send us specific expensive medications if they are in the position to do so. Finally we need ideas and support for the antifascist struggle and for antiracist mobilization, expertise that you in Germany have based on many years of experience.

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