

The struggle for water in Greece

(13 June 2013) A combination of opposing privatisation and putting forward practical alternatives is helping water campaigners mount an effective challenge to austerity in Greece. Privatisation and the nature of the state is moving to the centre of the struggle against austerity in Greece. The troika of the three key lenders to Greece – the European Commission, IMF and European Central Bank – is trying to speed up the sell-off of the country's public goods and resources by putting them in one holding company to be auctioned off in quick succession.

EPSU supports the Greek unions, citizens and citizens' movement "Initiative 136" to keep water companies in public hands. The first initiatives in Greece towards politically decisive resistance over water have come from the country's second largest city, Thessaloniki. Here the preliminary steps towards privatisation in 2007 were slowed down in part through the resistance of the water workers' union, which staged a four-day hunger strike during the city's international trade fair. The first tenders were eventually announced in 2009 and again the union – which, unlike most unions in Greece, had determinedly maintained its autonomy from all political parties – responded with a 12-day occupation of the company's main building.

The reputation that the water workers' union established with activists in Thessaloniki has proved to be a foundation on which today's growing campaign has been able to build. Union president George Archontopoulos says that in 2009 he used to invite himself to neighbourhood groups to put the arguments against privatisation. Now, he says, {'they are always asking us to come to them and there are many more of them.'} From this rose "Initiative 136".

The idea of "Initiative 136" is that if every water user bought a non-transferable share, 'the public could own the water company through a system of neighbourhood co-operatives of water users coming together through a single overall co operative'. €136 is the figure you get from dividing the €60 million for which the company is to be put on the stock market by the number of water meters in the city. 'It would, in effect, be a public-public answer to the troika's public-private partnership,' explains Theodoros Karyotis, a founding member of Initiative 136 from Thessaloniki's social

movements, who has also been involved in supporting the workers of the city's Vio.Me factory during their occupation and now their self-management of production. George Archontopoulos describes how 'the idea first came out of a press conference during the earlier struggles. To reinforce the argument for keeping water public we divided up the stock exchange price by the number of water users to show how the public could buy shares and keep the company in public hands. With the indignados we turned this the idea into a practical campaign.' In reality, the practical impact of Initiative 136 has been more in its propaganda power – illustrating vividly how water can be managed as a common resource 'without relying on either private companies or the existing state,' as Kostas Marioglou, another water workers' leader put it.

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