

Hans-Jürgen Urban, Executive board member of the German trade union IG Metall

Democracy and Solidarity, not Austerity and the Troika! For a radical change in Europe

A speech for a rally of the DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, Confederation of German Trade Unions) as part of the Blockupy protests, March 18th 2015

‘Why We are Here Today!’

Dear friends and colleagues, it is high time! High time for a change in Europe. A change that leaves behind neoliberal austerity policies and aggressive Troika dictates! That is why, today, we are here outside the European Central Bank - a financial institution moving into a grandiose building in a pompous ceremony. The ECB is an important agent in the anti-Europe coalition known as Troika - or ‘the institutions’! A coalition without any legitimacy!

The Troika is not an alliance that strengthens Europe, but one that ruins it.

The ECB therefore represents a type of politics that we don’t want, because it forces countries and human beings into the vice of neoliberal austerity and crushes them within it. And because it protects banks and gambling halls and, at the same time, attacks European social justice!

That is why I say:

We don’t need neoliberal aggressors organising self-satisfied celebrations! We need a radical political change in Europe! To achieve that we need non-violent but determined protest and resistance!

And that is why we are here today!

‘Why Aren’t the Greeks More Grateful...?!’

Dear friends and colleagues!

Anyone wanting to study the consequences of neoliberal austerity should consider Greece. In the media published by the conservative Springer publishing house - but unfortunately not only there - we find complaints that, in spite of having received a lot of support, the Greeks do not show enough insight and gratitude.

What’s the point of this nonsense? What should the Greeks be grateful for?

The Greeks didn’t get any of ‘our money’! The money didn’t go to any human beings, but mainly to the creditors of public debt - French and German banks! The banks were supported with billions of euros while billions were taken away from the social sector. ‘If only I were a bank’ - quite a few pensioners and sick or unemployed people probably thought, in Greece and elsewhere.

Profits are saved, but human beings are left to suffer. How absurd and cynical!

The Consequences of Enforced Austerity!

Yes, dear friends! Enforced austerity has driven Greece into a state of emergency: the economy has shrunk by a quarter since the beginning of the crisis; wages in the public sector have fallen by up to 50 per cent, while pensions have fallen by up to 45 per cent, and the health system is about to collapse. Suicide rates and infant mortality have risen significantly. This fatal collaboration of the economic crisis and the social cuts has led to a social and humanitarian catastrophe.

Colleagues and friends!

Many among us are trade unionists. We are committed to the idea of a democratic state that provides social support, and to international solidarity. But tell me: what would our commitments be worth if we simply watched a whole country being run into the ground economically and socially? No, a unionist’s duty is to do the opposite: to speak out, to organise protests, to practise solidarity!

That is another reason we are here today!

Unions Show Solidarity

Dear friends and colleagues!

That is why I am very happy about the trade unions' calls for solidarity with Greece. Calls from the European Trade Union Confederation and the presidents of the trade unions in the Confederation of German Trade Unions.

It says in the latter: 'Serious negotiations with the new Greek government must get under way, without any attempts at blackmail, in order to open up economic and social prospects for the country beyond the failed austerity policy. (...) Europe must not persist in pursuing, at the expense of the Greek population, a policy that has been decisively rejected by the majority of Greek voters. Just carrying on regardless is no longer an option!'

That's what solidarity sounds like – and I say: that's a good thing! Being an optimist, however, I would like to add: 'More would be better!' There is plenty of room to provide more concrete support, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to add some! I think it is high time for a Europe-wide action day of protest and solidarity with Greece!

Pathetic Triumphs

Dear friends and colleagues!

The Greeks have every right to defend themselves against the plundering of their community. The behaviour of the EU states and especially German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who act like their taskmasters, savouring their power and economic superiority, is pathetic. A cheap triumph that doesn't shame the Greek people but the representatives of an authoritarian EU. There is no doubt: many of the problems in Greece are home made. They are the consequence of a system where the elites have divided the wealth and the political power amongst themselves and have been doing so for decades.

I ask: why should deckhands, hotel employees, ill people, pensioners and unemployed people have to pay for that? And most importantly: why isn't the new government helped so it can make a clean break with the past? Why are obstacles thrown in its way wherever possible? Those who complain about Greece's past must support a new beginning! Anything else would be hypocrisy.

We don't want to accept this any longer, and we're not going to!

The ECB Can't Exclude Greece from Its Responsibilities!

Dear friends and colleagues!

It is quite obvious that Greece is being made an example of. Those who dare escape from the prison of austerity will be hunted down. A warning shot for progressive movements in other countries such as Spain. That fact in itself shows that we need to act. The government and policy change in Greece is not a catastrophe - it is a historic chance.

It's not just Greece and the so-called debtor states that suffer from the austerity regime. It is the entire EU. That's why supporting the Greeks is not an act of political charity, but one of solidarity based on legitimate self-interest. Yes, the future of European democracy is at stake.

These are our demands to the governments of the Euro states, the European Commission and the ECB:

1.

The Greek people's democratic vote must be respected! This includes being respected by the EU institutions and also by Merkel, Schäuble and Co.!

2.

The contracts between Greece and the Troika have turned out to hinder true reform policies and

choke the government! New negotiations about the contracts are required! Greece needs time and resources to rebuild the country!

3.

This is also and especially true for the ECB: it must no longer be an accomplice of the financial markets. It must become the servant of democratic governments. It must accept Greece's government bonds like those of all other Euro states. Blackmail through monetary policies has to stop.

‘Were They Allowed to Do That?’

Dear friends and colleagues!

Yes, the Greek people rebel. They have taken the liberty to elect a government, not because it was what the banks, Angela Merkel or Wolfgang Schäuble wanted, but because it was what the people in Greece wanted! Now half of Europe, stunned, is wondering: ‘Were they allowed to do that?’

There can only be one reply to this: yes! They were not just allowed to - they had to do it. Carrying on as before would have been irresponsible. The Greek elections were an act of self-defence! An act of democratic resistance against the cliquism of the parties that had hitherto been in power and the financial dictates of the Troika!

No state or government in the world can be obligated to rush headlong into disaster with its eyes wide open! The right to resist is a fundamental democratic right! This is true in Europe as much as elsewhere, and the power of big money is not exempt from it!

The Greek Government is Doing Our Work, Too!

The task the Syriza government is facing is gigantic. It can be debated whether so far it has done everything the right way, whether every single tactic and every single statement was wise. I am not talking about people tucking their shirts in.

I think, however, that instead of giving points for performance from Germany we should start supporting the Greek government. They are doing our work, too! The work of the left in Europe!

One reason their fight against the neoliberal austerity policies is so difficult is that we can't do it right! We in Germany, in France, in Italy - in the countries that call the shots in Europe!

So let's not play know-it-alls. Let's organise solidarity! Solidarity with those who want a different, more democratic, more united future for Europe. In Greece and elsewhere!

For a New Campaign against the Bild Newspaper

Also, it is time to rebel against the slander and agitation in the media: they are unbearable. It is also unbearable that there is no outcry against them.

When newspapers like the conservative German tabloid Bild, published by the Springer-Verlag, perpetrate smear campaigns and twist the truth, society must react.

I am not nostalgic, but sometimes there are important lessons to be learnt from history, for example about dealing with this kind of journalism. I am thinking of the anti-Springer campaign organised by the movement of 1968. At the time many people called for a boycott of the Bild newspaper because of its propaganda against the rebelling students. Interesting, isn't it?

Can we learn from history? We know, after all, that only when the tills stop ringing will the Springer company start to listen.

How about a new campaign? ‘Not one euro for slurs against countries and people in Europe! Not one euro for Bild!’ What do you think?

Alternatives are Needed – and Possible!

Dear friends and colleagues!

We stand by Europe, its great idea of overcoming borders, prejudice and nationalism. The idea of a

region of wealth, democracy and solidarity, the idea of being open to the outside and taking on the role of a civil conflict settler in the world.

In a Europe of banks, austerity and neoliberalism, however, these ideas are denied on a daily basis and will suffocate. That's why we are saying: We must restructure Europe, we must restore it morally and democratically!

And we mustn't let anyone tell us that these plans are utopias and nonsense. Europe must change - otherwise it jeopardises its future.

Another Europe is possible. We can name steps towards it:

1.

The ECB is a public institution with public tasks and public responsibility. It's simply absurd: the ECB provides banks with cheap money at the lowest interest possible, and the banks pass it on to countries as expensive credits. The banks make money while the countries bleed - and the taxpayers bleed with them!

This has to stop: The ECB should be allowed to finance countries without the markets as middlemen - through direct credits and at acceptable conditions!

2.

It is essential that the ECB is thoroughly democratised: it must be obligated to support the reconstruction measures of democratically legitimate governments.

The people in its control centres shouldn't be 'Deutsche Bank' bankers, 'Goldmen' or other Wall Street agents, but representatives sent by parliaments.

3.

Politics shouldn't be dominated by social cuts, but rather by attempts to create a better social welfare system. This is true for national states as well as EU institutions.

The European Trade Unions have proposed a Europe-wide programme of investments and development measures. This could provide the financial means for investments in development in EU regions that need such investments: in the health sector and the public service sector, for infrastructure and not least to reorganise industry so that it is more ecological! It would increase economic power and tax revenue, and make possible a kind of budget consolidation characterised by solidarity.

4.

In order to achieve this, the money must be taken from where it exists in abundance - providing private luxury rather than social benefits! It is high time for a radical redistribution of wealth at the expense of those who own gigantic fortunes and amounts of capital! This could be done through a property and inheritance tax. Or a transnational tax on finance transactions. This could free up to 44 billion euros for public spending in Germany alone!

Alternatives for another Europe

Dear friends and colleagues!

The problem is not a lack of alternatives, but a lack of political determination. This determination won't appear if we sit around.

We don't rely on the strength of good arguments or the insights of those in power. Nothing will happen without pressure!

This pressure has to come from society; it must be organised in the streets, in the media and in the parliaments. Our movement, our fight for a different and better Europe is only beginning.

I'm convinced that Europe will only be ours if we make it ours.

So let's start!

Translation: Stephanie Laimer, coorditrad