The Closure of ERT is a Litmus Test for the Greek Left

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How would you feel if the UK government shut down the BBC overnight?

On the 12th of June 2013, without an iota of prior deliberation or debate, the Greek government announced that the state broadcaster (ERT), including its archives, radio stations, and orchestra are to be shut down. The closure, widely perceived as an attempt to silence opposition voices from within ERT, deprives Greece of a public outlet for the free transmission of information and a consistently high-quality source of debate, resulting in the loss of 2700 jobs. Mainstream media has reported a recent court decision putatively annulling the closure, portraying it as a setback for the governing coalition. The court decision actually supports government policy: it only requires that ERT be reopened, while explicitly granting that all current ERT staff have legally been made redundant. Moreover, and despite appearances to the contrary, the two junior partners to the governing coalition (centre-left PASOK and DIMAR) have lent support to the redundancy-allowing decision.

What has been the reaction on the part of the Greek left? One tactic has invested in popular reaction, and another in parliamentary opposition. The rationale behind the first tactic, explicitly—if reluctantly—adopted in tandem by the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the Greek Communist Party (KKE) goes something like this: as long as the governing coalition is not toppled by its two junior

partners, popular reaction might force it to reverse the closure. The second tactic has consisted in bringing legislation into parliament to annul the relevant law. The rationale behind it seems to be that the governing coalition might thereby lose support sufficient to sustain the closure, or to precipitate its downfall.

Both tactics suffer from similar defects: they are overoptimistic regarding popular support, and the responsiveness of parliament, while giving government the initiative. On the one hand, popular support has yet to grow sufficiently to force a government row-back on the closure. And even if it did, merely annulling the closure would return the situation to the *status quo ante*, that is, the state of affairs containing the very conditions of crisis, wage cuts, unemployment, and futurelessness for ERT. These eventualities cannot be reversed without a change of government annulling the memoranda Greece has signed up to (which consign it to increasing misery and barbarism for decades to come, by the way).

The parliamentary tactic, on the other hand, is founded on deep-rooted parliamentary illusions. First off, any bill proposing closure-reversal is very unlikely to pass in any form, for it implies dissolution of the governing coalition. Neither PASOK nor DIMAR have the decency to accept this, despite their flimsy late-night barks over ‘authoritarianism’. But what’s most interesting is what comes after. When the parliamentary tactic fails, the governing coalition will demand that all stakeholders (including the parties that carried the anti-closure bill to parliament) withdraw their active support to former employees now occupying ERT, and allow police to clear the building for its trimmed-down successor, in accordance with court orders. Any failure to comply with this demand will be dubbed a violation of ‘legitimate’ democratic interests expressed by the Greek parliament. What kind of answer will

the proponents of ERT offer? This is where the plot thickens.

Under present circumstances, the protection of ERT's workers ERT is of paramount moral and strategic significance. Indeed, it is a litmus test for the left, and especially for the leadership of SYRIZA: any move towards the 'law' and 'order' slyly propagated by the ruling coalition implies betrayal of the Greek Constitution, of democratic principle, and of the workers themselves. But a state-owned-ERT-without-cuts-or-layoffs is not presently on the political table, and promises for future nationalizations are not enough. ERT workers must be supported *today at their actual place of work*. The demand for a worker-controlled, de facto non-state-controlled ERT therefore acquires unprecedented urgency. The left must defend that demand, with all its rich political, ideological and organizational implications.

This discussion inevitably leads to a more fundamental premiss: that the very logic of a state, or 'public' television, indeed of state ownership and control more generally, has unsound foundations. More prosaically: state television is, by definition, an apparatus of the (bourgeois) state. State-run telecommunications constitute the central nervous system of the state's ideological apparatus, as it were, and so are of considerable significance to the reproduction of national capitals. The sooner we wake up to this basic truth, the sooner we'll rid ourselves of illusions about their emancipatory potential. There is, therefore, a tint of irony to the left's renewed vows of fidelity to its once-reviled state broadcaster. Of course the government made its decision precisely because ERT was deemed unsuccessful in its role as governmental mouthpiece. But it does not follow that state TV is not an apparatus of the Greek capitalist state. Naturally something similar is true of almost all hospitals, schools, and universities in Greece, and no one in their right mind would

fail to oppose their closure or deterioration. Yet the main reason why the left should defend state ownership in all of these cases has to do with the prospect of transforming them into cells of worker ownership and control. State forms of property, even at their most democratic, imply bureaucratic hierarchies, a mere choice over one's masters. Such hierarchies are not eradicated by ministerial seal, parliamentary acts, or party decisions, but by people taking production decisions into their own hands.

What does all this mean? The left parties that recently joined voices outside the main ERT bulidings should now join forces for the protection and defence of a new, free ERT, under the ownership and control of its employees. The history of ERT, along with the social possibilities opened up by its infrastructure, can set the tone for a generalized counteroffensive, 'despotic inroads' against the devastating onslaught of the memoranda, with a view to the most rigorous expansion of workers' control throughout Greek society.