

voices from the frontline

Let us try to make another social work possible ...: a report on the Greek Social Work Action Network, 2008–16

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Undoubtedly, the *Social work manifesto* published in 2004, the conferences and the activity of the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) in the UK could not but inspire social workers across the globe. Among them, there was a group of social workers in Greece that decided, in 2008, to create a Greek SWAN. The first steps of the Greek initiative focused on the creation of a blog (see: <https://socialworkaction.wordpress.com/>). Gradually, more and more social workers, academics and social work students joined in the group in Patras, which was established in 2011, while another group was also established in Athens in 2014. The Greek SWAN is self-organised, without official funding and in conjunction with the aims and principles of the UK SWAN but also retaining its autonomy. Additionally, some of the main objectives of the Greek SWAN are described as follows:

- the development of radical and critical social work;
- the defence of the universal and public nature of welfare;
- the elimination of all discrimination or prejudice on both a personal and social level;
- the creation of alliances across society;
- on the front line, political activity in solidarity and resistance movements; and
- the promotion of social change for equality and social justice.

During the years of crisis, the Greek SWAN has been considerably active at many levels. In the following paragraphs, there is a short report of the main activities of the Greek SWAN over recent years. The reader should also take into consideration two main facts of the general context that affected not only the Greek SWAN and social workers in general, but also Greek society. First, in the years of austerity, Greek people experienced, if not suffered, a humanitarian crisis. The ‘economic crisis’, as it was known, was used as the perfect alibi to rapidly promote strict austerity measures that caused serious damage to society. Some of the austerity measures resulted, and

still do, in cuts in salaries and pensions, curtailments in health and welfare provision, the violation of human rights, and so on. However (and second), in confronting this, the Greek people created hundreds of grassroots welfare structures, known as the 'solidarity movement', while the anti-racist movement in Greece is probably one of the strongest in Europe. In this direction, the Greek people have been struggling for many years to defend the public nature of services, health, welfare and common goods. In this context, the Greek SWAN could not but be more active and participate in the struggles of the people and also be directly interconnected with the rising movements.

The aim of this report is to record and publicise the activity of the Greek SWAN. We hope that this report will contribute to a further discussion of theories and practices that promote social justice. At least in our case, that was our main goal, or, to put it differently, 'Let us try to make another social work possible'. To which extent this was successfully achieved will hopefully be the subject of future publications.

Participation in public assemblies in Ag. Sofia neighbourhood in Patras

In 2010 and 2011, the Square Movement flourished in Greece, and members of the Greek SWAN participated. Later, after a shocking wave of repression by the police, many of the grassroots initiatives started becoming more active at the local level, in their neighbourhoods. Towards this direction, the Greek SWAN was involved in one of these public assemblies that took place every week in one of the ex-middle-class (now new-poor) areas in Patras. The participation of the members of the Greek SWAN gave the opportunity to: conduct necessary political and social analysis of the current situation; provide social support, such as free food and clothes to the community; organise events; cooperate with the school of the area; participating in the demos; and, in general, attempt to act collectively and resist in a context where austerity measures were part of the everyday political agenda.

Community action and community development: three years of activity in Workers' Houses in Lefka, Patras

The Greek SWAN has been active for more than three years in Lefka, one of the poorest areas in the city of Patras, with high poverty and unemployment rates. Based on the principles of community action and radical social work, our aim was the empowerment of the local populations and also raising 'critical consciousness' and activation in demanding their rights. Some of the main actions are described as follows:

- cooperation and coalition with their Habitants' Union;
- social research for the needs of the community;
- participation in and creation of regular assemblies of the habitants;
- creative groups for children;
- Social Solidarity school for children;
- social support for poor families and connection with the public social services of the town;
- support group for women;

- participation in two self-organised festivals inside the community in order to break down the stigma of the poor area, but also to activate the habitants and connect them with the social services and the movements of the town;
- support of the Habitants' Union in demanding a water supply, which was achieved in 2015; and
- support of the Habitants' Union in demanding public spaces for children.

Solidarity Clinic of Patras

At the time of crisis and particularly in 2014/15, members of the Greek SWAN participated in the Solidarity Clinic of Patras. The implementation of neoliberal policies had resulted in curtailments of the funding of hospitals and health care. Combined with the rise of unemployment, the result was that 2.5 million people dropped out of health-care provision state-wide. The Solidarity Clinics were, in many cases, a collective response against this crisis that not only provided primary health care for free, but also demanded public health-care provision. Social work has been involved in the Solidarity Clinics in various ways (for more, see Teloni and Adam, 2016). Examples of the involvement of the Greek SWAN are as follows:

- participation in the assemblies of the health professionals and volunteers of the Solidarity Clinics;
- once per week, the members of the SWAN were in the Solidarity Clinic providing free social services;
- support of families and cooperation with public social service;
- announcements against the cuts in health and participation in marches and strike;
- social research for the users of the Solidarity Clinic;
- demanding free vaccines for children from the local health department; and
- social action in the neighbourhood.

Connections with the anti-racist movement

The link between social work and the anti-racist movement is one of the basic elements of the historical evolution of social work and, at the same time, one of the core issues of radical social work. The Greek SWAN could not but have a strong connection with the anti-racist movement in Greece. The anti-racist movement has a long tradition in Greece in both providing solidarity and creating grassroots welfare initiatives, but also in the collective demand for the rights of refugees and migrants. The Greek SWAN cooperates with several anti-racist organisations in Patras and Athens, and participates in several actions such as: solidarity actions for refugees; campaigns against racism and fascism; announcements; participation in anti-racist festivals; demonstrations against fortress Europe and anti-refugees policies; and so on.

Other actions

Supporting the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer community

For a short period in 2015, members of the Greek SWAN participated in the assemblies of the local lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) community

in Patras in order to support the group in planning and organising events and interventions in the community.

Symposiums

In 2014, the Greek SWAN had a symposium in Athens on radical and critical social work. In 2016, the Greek SWAN also organised a public event in Patras to raise awareness of the network's activities.

Participation in collective demands and in putting pressure on political parties to change unfair policies

The Greek SWAN, in coalition with users' organisations, unions and movements, demands fairness in a number of issues, such as human rights, unfair policies, anti-immigration policies, racism and fascism, and equal public welfare and health. Additionally, it intervenes through its blog, newspaper articles, announcements and campaigns regarding critical issues in social work, social policy and human rights.

Reference

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