

On Greece's Halkidiki peninsula, in the North-East of the country, a monumental battle is taking place. The town of Ierissos and its inhabitants have become emblematic of this struggle, by taking a stand against an immensely powerful opponent. That opponent is Eldorado Gold, a Canadian company, which has bought up a vast area of land in Halkidiki, and is in the process of constructing a massive gold mine, tearing up an area of astonishing natural beauty with potentially devastating consequences for the surrounding areas and their populations.

While attending the first Balkan green summer camp, which took place in Ierissos, we had the opportunity to speak with many of the activists who've been part of this struggle. We were also got the chance to experience the movement first hand, by joining a protest at the mine's construction site.

On the way to the protest, situated in an area called Skouries, an activist, who asked to be identified as D.C., filled us in on some of the background, stating, "Eldorado's plan is to open up the whole mountain area." The current mining pit is 700 meters wide in diameter, and 250 meters deep. But D.C. believes this is likely to expand, further eating into the natural area surrounding the mine.

The region has always been a mining area. But it has never before seen a project on this scale. Alekos Georgopoulos, an activist from the Greek Green Institute, describes this project as a scandal on three levels. "It is a financial scandal because it was a very small company buying a very big property for a very low price. In addition, a 'financial assistance' fund of 15 million euros of public money was given as a subsidy from the government to the Greek partner of El Dorado - a scandal for which the Greek Government was condemned by the European Courts." Then there is the environmental dimension: "There has been destruction of the environment in terms of the forest and underground waters. Also, several tonnes of dynamite per day are set to be used at the construction site, which will generate an estimated 3116 tonnes of dust per hour from the pit." Thirdly, it is a violation of human rights, "We have seen the invading [by security forces] of people's houses at 3 o'clock in the morning - people being taken to prison and kept for up to 20 hours without any of their relatives knowing where they are - taking their DNA samples without their consent and charging them with really ridiculous accusations."

How the struggle began

Christos Karastergios is one of the people who was there from the very beginning of the fight against the gold mine. He explains the initial sale of the land: 317,000 hectares - the property of the previous gold-mining company (TVX) being used for a much smaller-scale project were given away for only 11 million euros. He describes this as an expropriation

which gave the company free reign to use the territory for whatever purpose it pleased, without restriction. Yet only a small number of people were mobilised against the project at that time, around 2006-2007, as most did not believe any large-scale project would be allowed to go ahead.

After the contract was first signed, only five days were allocated for public consultation over a very lengthy document, explains Karastergios. With so little time, many local politicians voted in favour of the project simply because it promised jobs, without being aware of the full scale of the project and the damage it would entail.

It wasn't until 2010 that it became apparent major works were on the verge of commencing, and alarm bells began to sound. This was when Karastergios and others began trying to mobilise people through the organisations and associations that already existed in the village. Despite being a village of only 4,500 inhabitants, Ierissos boasts a remarkably vibrant civil society with 21 registered associations, which come in a huge variety, from dance, to education, to fishing and many more.

But the activists encountered enormous difficulties in trying to make their voices heard. A media blackout meant that even people in nearby areas had no idea what was happening. Pressure on journalists came from media bosses and owners, and many feared losing their jobs if they reported about the situation. To make matters even more difficult, they were often just dismissed as citizens with no expertise on the matter. Despite not being political himself, Karastergios credits the Greens for being the only political party who actively supported their cause from day one, helping to put the activists in contact with politicians, journalists and ecological associations, and feels indebted to them for this reason.

Getting the word out

Faced with such opposition and indifference from media and public, Karastergios realised they would have to document their own arguments and positions with hard evidence, so he contacted experts and professors from universities in the region. Some were reluctant to talk but others were concerned and willing to engage. They eventually succeeded in bringing together a cross-university expert group of 26 people - drawn from all departments linked to the mining (minerals, biology, architecture, urban planning, geology, agriculture, chemistry, etc.) - who carried out an alternative environmental assessment backed up with lots of details and evidence. The report stated categorically that the consequences, in terms of environmental destruction and pollution, would be disastrous if the project were to go ahead, and would impact every aspect of life - tourism, water, environment, farming, and so on.

The assessment gave rise to considerable debate among Greece's academics, but its impact

beyond this was severely limited. As a result, Karastergios and his fellow activists started taking their message and findings to the neighbouring villages around the local area. At first only a few people came to listen but as information began to trickle through this rose to hundreds. They visited countless villages with experts from all different backgrounds and from all across the political spectrum to convey that the struggle was void of political agenda but was an issue that affected everybody. Gradually, the message began to spread across the country and the campaigners began to win people's trust in different sectors beyond the academic world, as the full scale of the risks to people's livelihoods became clearer.

Violent repression

The response of Eldorado Gold to this resistance was to attempt to win support from people by offering jobs to a number of them - thereby dividing the community - and using these local supporters to defend the project, sometimes even with physical force. This strategy led to tensions flaring up into violent confrontations, in which police failed to protect peaceful protestors, which in turn led to clashes between local people and police forces.

In February 2013, an incident occurred in which a group of masked individuals set fire to the construction equipment at the site of the mine. While responsibility for the damage was never determined, this provided the trigger for a series of arrests in Ierissos. The arrests, says Karastergios, happened in the middle of the night at gunpoint, and left the people of the town in shock.

The last village standing: The story of Ierissos

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It was around this time that the then Prime Minister Antonis Samaras visited Skouries and gave a speech declaring that the project and investment would go ahead at any cost. For the people of Ierissos, this was an ominous warning, and their anxiety was proved justified as shortly afterwards came a harsh crackdown on protests, with police using tear gas and plastic bullets to disperse protesters. However, as D.C. points out, the arrests, brutality and other provocative tactics on behalf of the police only served to reinforce people's determination to resist. And many of those who did not join protests themselves mobilised to support the protesters materially, with supplies, food, and other resources.

This escalation represented the turning point when foreign media began to take notice of what was happening. Consequently, this new attention required the movement to organise itself further in order to respond to the increasing demand for information and pledges of support. A protest took place in Thessaloniki with 30,000 people, the largest for 20 years. At this juncture, protestors began to feel that victory was in sight, yet they were soon to realise that many more battles still lay ahead.

This wave of mobilisation was followed by mass arrests, which ignited an outpouring of anger from the people of the town, who mounted an attack on the police headquarters, leading the police to withdraw their presence from Ierissos. Roads leading into the town were barricaded and control over who was permitted to enter was seized by the people of the town. This situation lasted for almost two years, and earned the town its reputation as a bastion of resistance, described by El Pais and other media as, 'Asterix's village' for the tenacity of its protestors.

In recent months, clashes between protestors and security forces have continued, and so has the crackdown on the resistance, backed up by a new counter-terrorism law adopted in Greece, which has enabled security forces to monitor the people of Ierissos through repressive measures such as phone-tapping. Around 360 people are currently facing charges in court, says Karastergios, a significant number for such a small place. Ever since

information about the situation began to flow more freely with the interest of foreign media, Greeks from across the country have begun to join and support the campaign, which now has activists based in several cities.

An uncertain political climate

Alongside these obstacles, the outlook for the campaign against the mine is further complicated by the current tumultuous political situation in Greece. Syriza has long voiced objections to the mine, and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras visited the area on several occasions to express support for the protestors, says D.C. As a result, their accession to power brought, “hopes for a magic solution and that everything would be closed”, he adds. Thanasis Makris, a member of the Greek Greens and the Greek Green Institute, has experienced first-hand the frustration that this political uncertainty brings. Whenever political changes occur this sets the campaign back as the process is delayed or halted. “It seems this isn’t anything that can be stopped until we have a more normalised political situation.” However, Thanasis is adamant that this should not discourage protestors. “We have to keep up the pressure,” he says.

Yet unfortunately it seems that morale in the movement has dropped, due to the lack of progress and intense ongoing difficulties. The protest which we attended was very low in numbers compared to previous ones. This is partly due to the time of year, explains D.C., as many people work in the tourism sector and cannot get away to protest during the high season, but this is also due to the political situation. “We don’t believe in promises anymore,” says D.C.. “I support the government because I support the party that forms it but you cannot rely on them; now they are in government they act like politicians.” Thanasis is somewhat more optimistic. “You have to pressure them, either by mobilising people to protest in large numbers - or the other way, which is a means the left doesn’t have, is to lobby them - not just with money or buying people, but going to them and explaining - this always has an impact.”

Karastergios explains that people initially gave Syriza the benefit of the doubt due to the economic difficulties the party faced. Yet patience is now wearing thin, in light of the absence of any encouraging actions or statements from the government. People are now afraid that this is linked to the agreement between Greece and the EU, and that Syriza is not able to act for this reason, as Karastergios explains.

The struggle continues

Karastergios himself is willing to allow more time, yet he admits it is difficult to wait when the movement seems to be suffering and losing momentum as time passes. People in the movement are becoming increasingly restless and divided, with internal quarrels increasing.

Those who risked their own safety previously in protests are especially frustrated with this decline. For Karastergios, the most important thing is to continue the fight. He remembers a time when the whole village appeared to be acting as one, with a clear aim and all inhabitants invested in reaching it and showing solidarity with one another.

There have been some heartening developments, though, with support coming from the outside in the form of renowned figures such as author Naomi Klein, who has visited the site three times. Canadian politicians, feeling a sense of responsibility for the actions of El Dorado, have also raised the issue. Additionally, Rebecca Harms, among many other Green politicians from all over the world, has visited Skouries and raised the issue when meeting with the President of Greece.

Initiatives to help raise funds for the legal costs of those being pursued by the courts have also taken place, such as a recent concert in the area which was attended by tens of thousands, and cooperatives selling local produce which also brings some income to the village. Despite the scale of the obstacles – government inaction and broken promises, police brutality and provocations, and the underhand tactics used by interests behind the mine to push the project forward – the inhabitants of Ierissos have not given up the fight. Their struggle for solidarity and environmental justice, like those of so many other campaigners defending their surroundings and livelihoods, serves as an inspiration to all those facing down much greater opponents, and a reminder that even the smallest village can stand its ground.

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