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Greece

Could SYRIZA become a “new PASOK”?

- Debate - Perspectives in Greece -

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The unexpected rise of SYRIZA [1] to be the second largest party in the last two elections in Greece, and the projection of Alexis Tsipras as the next prime minister has caused many people to think that SYRIZA already occupies the position once held by PASOK [2] for nearly forty years.

Many see Tsipras in the leadership role once occupied by Andreas Papandreu, a role decisive for the period after the fall of the 1967-74 military dictatorship. According to the prevailing terminology of the majority of the Greek Left (including SYRIZA), we are now facing the consolidation of a new “two-party system” [3], i.e. a duopoly of parties claiming government power above class distinctions and apart from the relationship of class forces. But if the term “two-party system” in the past obscured a correct reading of the political situation, today the same term not only obscures the current political reality, it masks the gravity of the tragic social situation and the current political stalemate. Certainly the external similarities between the current SYRIZA party after the elections, and the PASOK of 1974-81, are evident. The crucial question is whether these apparent similarities represent a substantial commonality between the two political parties, and further whether they predetermine social and political developments in the near future.

The rise and integration of PASOK

The PASOK party of 1974-81 rallied around the popular strata and especially those who were still under the strong influence of the tradition and memories of the great national liberation movement (EAM 1940-44) [4] with strong references to socialism. “Really existing socialism” had lost the attractive glow of revolution and social regeneration, but its very existence still confirmed the possibility of running a post-capitalist economy with centralized state planning. The alliance of popular strata around PASOK of the period 1974-81 developed gradually with steady steps and the parallel building of party structures. The party members were active in the social movements’ rank and file, not only in the petty bourgeois strata of smallholders and small tradesmen, who undeniably formed the party’s backbone. They were also in the labor movement that had emerged in factories, rural cooperatives and in the municipalities after the fall of the dictatorship. The term “self-organization” was first used by Andreas Papandreu to denote the impetuous and largely spontaneous development of party local units nationwide.

PASOK introduced a radical program which included the creation of the “welfare state” (public and free education, a national health care system) and promised the exit of Greece from NATO and the EEC. It cultivated and presented a crass nationalist kind of anti-imperialism before its rise to government. PASOK marched to the elections of October 18, 1981 with the demagogic slogan that reflected popular expectations: “On Oct. 18 Socialism.” Without doubt, the day of its ascension to government, the PASOK leadership instantly forgot about socialism and any exit from NATO and the EEC. The radical program of the “third way” to socialism gave way to managing and modernizing the bourgeois state. The eventual reforms were broadly in line with the needs of capitalism in Greece. Party structures followed a path of rapid integration into the state bureaucracy, while simultaneously waging a long internal party struggle to neutralize, marginalize and isolate its labor rank and file. The radical minorities that had joined the party since its foundation were either expelled by administrative means, or were fully integrated into the bureaucratic apparatus.

At critical moments, Andreas Papandreu, a powerful and charismatic figure, showed he could directly relate to the feelings and desires of broad layers, and cultivate or reinvigorate their illusions for a painless, parliamentary “third way” to socialism. Certainly global capitalism since the early 1980s, having descended into the long wave of recession, launched its major offensive against the gains of the labor movement. The neo-liberalism of Reagan and

Thatcher led the way. Greek capitalism, however, seemed to have capacity for some concessions to the “welfare state.” These policies were at least partially at odds with mainstream world capitalist politics.

The electoral rise and mutation of SYRIZA

SYRIZA, after the 2012 elections, also rallied the majority of the working classes who still refer, in a rather general and abstract way, to the ideological tradition of the left. Certainly, after the collapse of “actually existing socialism”, more than two decades of ideological dominance of neo-liberalism have dispersed confusion and disorientation in the working class and popular strata. But SYRIZA (and previously SYNASPISMOS) have never attempted to come to terms with this situation with a clear and honest self-criticism on the restrictions and the attitude of the historical leadership of KKE-interior [5] and then SYN towards the bureaucracies of “really existing socialism”. Even more, the general ideological weakness and organizational decline of the Left opened the way for the growing stronger trends of xenophobia and racism within Greek society, and finally allowed, under the conditions of sharp economic crisis, the emergence of right-wing and neo-Nazi parties.

The rallying of workers to SYRIZA took place mainly in the parliamentary arena. It was not a product of the development of party structures and the activity of party members in the labor movement, nor did it come from the new resistance movement of popular assemblies and popular local self-organization. The presence of SYRIZA in mass mobilizations remains half-hearted, limited and linked to its rise in parliamentary elections. The election campaigns of SYRIZA rely much more on “contact” with the popular strata through the media and advertising slogans, and much less on the direct contact and activation of the potential of its social base. The public speeches of Tsipras move increasingly towards promises of a better management of the bourgeois state and the capitalist economy. Moreover Tsipras (like the young A. Papandreou) tries to rise above the party apparatus and to address directly popular feelings and hopes for a painless, parliamentary way out of the crisis nightmare “within the institutions of the EU. The popular strata rally reluctantly and without enthusiasm around SYRIZA, because they sense both the gravity of the situation and the utopian character of the easy promises.

An important section of the SYN party cadres is already integrated in the state bureaucracy. The election program of SYRIZA remains strictly within the framework of management of the bourgeois state. The legendary declarations for “debt rescheduling” through the institutions of the EU are of dubious credibility and are restricted to the rescue of the remnants of the welfare state and the rather vague “productive reconstruction” of the capitalist economy. The prospect of socialism, with planned economy, nationalization of banks and large companies, as the only real alternative to the crisis of capitalism was not really mentioned in pre-election period, and much less in post-election proclamations. The word “socialism” has been expunged, seemingly forever, from Tsipras’ vocabulary.

Even worse, with the rapid rise of the fascist Golden Dawn (GD), SYRIZA restricts itself to defending the institutions of a bankrupt bourgeois democracy. It is a democracy that sinks into general disrepute, immersed in scandals that reflect the mutual recriminations of panicked capitalist politicians. At the very moment when the socialist perspective should be advanced against the corrupt regime, SYRIZA provides space for the screaming and the demagogy of the GD gang. At the very moment when SYRIZA should decisively confront the fascist terror in the streets and neighborhoods with mass mobilizations, it resorts to invoking bourgeois legitimacy and relying on the cops – who are heavily infiltrated and corroded by fascism. Also, the first attempt to integrate or eliminate the radical “components” of SYRIZA began much earlier with the proposal of the SYN leadership for a single party apparatus last September. This mutation is supposed to make it more reliable in the eyes of the ruling class.

Certainly, the chance of obtaining governmental power in a European country like Greece, by one of the traditional left parties like SYRIZA for the first time after decades, alarmed the European rulers. Not due to the risks posed by SYRIZA, but because of the general instability and uncontrolled developments likely to unfold as broad layers will

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perceive such a left government as their own victory, and because of the chain reactions likely to occur in other European countries. They know very well that the conditions of the economic crisis have created a social powder keg that could explode at any time, regardless of the desires, plans and estimations of a left reformist leadership.

On the other hand, the majority of the European radical left seems to be hypnotized by the prospect of an electoral victory of SYRIZA. Most of the European left parties rushed to give unconditional support to the SYN party leadership, without much understanding of the relationship of class forces within Greek society, its reflection on the political scene, and the true nature and history of the SYN party. Certainly the desire for a victory of the left in Europe, after nearly three decades of continuous decline, is fully justified and understandable. But substituting one's desires for the reality under current conditions is extremely dangerous. Even worse are the unjust characterizations and attacks on those forces trying to establish a consistent anti-capitalist and communist left under these difficult conditions.

** This is a translation of an article published in SPARTAKOS, the review of OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the 4th International.*

[1] SYRIZA: Coalition of the Radical Left - United Social Front is a left-wing political party, originally founded before the general election of 2004, as a coalition of the party SYNASPIMOS with a broad array of small left-wing and radical political groups and independent politicians. In the general election of 2004, the coalition gathered 3.3% of the total. In the general elections of 17 June 2012 SYRIZA gathered 27% of the total became the second largest party in the Greek parliament after New Democracy and is now the main opposition party.

[2] PASOK: Panhellenic Socialist Movement, is the main centre left party and historically one of the two major political parties in Greece (the other is the right party of New Democracy). It was founded by Andreas Papandreou after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. In 1981 PASOK became Greece's first social democratic party to win a majority in the Parliament.

[3] In Greek the term is: “Dikommatismos”, “bipartisanship”, like the two-party political system of the USA.

[4] EAM: National Liberation Front was the main movement of the Greek resistance during the Axis occupation of Greece during World War II. Its main driving force was the Greek Communist Party (KKE). EAM became a mass social movement and established its own government in the areas it had liberated until spring 1944. The movement reached its peak after the Liberation in late 1944, when it controlled most parts of the country before suffering a catastrophic military and political defeat after a series of tragic mistakes committed by the Stalinist leadership.

[5] Greek Communist Party - Interior was formed after a major split of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) in 1968. KKE- Interior essentially broke its ties with KKE's ideological subordination to the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It later established bonds with parties such as the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Romanian Communist Party of Nicolae Ceau?escu, adopting a Euro-communist perspective. The party also opted for a “renewal of the left” and embraced the concept of “socialism with a human face”. KKE - Interior was dissolved some months after its 4th Congress in 1986, splitting into two new parties: the left “Communist Party of Greece (Interior) - Renewing Left” and the right “Greek Left”, the ancestor of today's SYN.