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Greece, a story without the distorting prism of Syriza

- Fourth International resolutions - World Congresses - 17th World Congress - 2018 - 17th World Congress discussion -

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During recent years, the debate on Greece has not been just a debate among the other ones. The particular intensity of the crisis, of the capitalist attack and of the social fightback, as well as the emergence of a party of reformist origin that finally managed to take power, in coalition with a nationalist right-wing party – all these have made Greece the point of reference for 5 years. The catastrophic experience of SYRIZA has marked not only the end of an era for the workers' movement in Greece, but also the impasse of the political strategy that advocated a "broad left party" and an "anti-austerity government".

Unfortunately, this strategy was not only promoted by reformist parties, but also by the majority of the anti-capitalist left around the world. Most left leaderships were so enthusiastic about the perspective of a SYRIZA government that they wouldn't even discuss the possibility of an independent anticapitalist formation in Greece or listen to what Greek revolutionary organizations had to say about the character and role of SYRIZA. SYRIZA was the undisputed model for a strategic project in the context of which political, organizational and electoral unity with reformists was absolutely instrumental. Now that this project has collapsed on the heads of the Greek working class, the vast majority of the proponents of this strategy is stubbornly avoiding an honest balance-sheet. After SYRIZA imposed the harsh 3rd austerity pact (memorandum) in July 2015, most of them wrote hasty articles blaming their former hero, Tsipras, for being either a traitor or so naïve as to think that he could negotiate with the lenders, and then just left Greece aside and started envisioning the same project as SYRIZA in other countries. As a leader of the Fourth International said in the International Committee of February 2017, "if something proves wrong at some point, it doesn't mean it was already wrong in the first place". According to that, one can claim that nothing is ever wrong. Things just change.

If we need a clear balance-sheet of the Greek experience, though, this is exactly because the same strategy is attempted in other countries. We think that comrades who are trying to draw their conclusions from Greece may find it useful to read what the members of the Greek Section of the FI, OKDE-Spartakos, have supported during all those years and why they have opted from the very beginning to not follow or "critically" support SYRIZA, but build an independent anticapitalist project, ANTARSYA, instead. Anyone who follows the evolution of our positions step by step can ascertain that, unlike the vast majority of left narratives, our opposition to SYRIZA is not a post Christum prophecy.

Recent stories about Greece are like modern fairy-tails, full of inaccuracies, myths and "wishful thinking". This is our modest contribution to the demystification of the recent political history of this country.

Has SYRIZA been an expression of the rise of the social movement?

Most international left people would reply "yes", with no hesitation. SYRIZA represented the mass movement, and this is why we should have all supported it. However, this is not exactly true. SYRIZA did receive the majority of the votes of the working class and the poor strata, and this could not have happened if it wasn't for the mass movement that developed in the country. However, SYRIZA was never organically linked with the movement. The party had always a very small membership, with particularly few workers and unionists. SYRIZA did never lead a single mass movement or workers' strike, and its intervention in class struggles was always marginal. To present SYRIZA as a party of the mass movement is a myth. Its relation with the working class and the oppressed was a relation of electoral representation. Even this relation, though, was consolidated not during, but after the culmination point of the

mass movement. During the hot period 2010-2012, SYRIZA was only polling poor results. It skyrocketed not before the spring of 2012, when the mass movement had already retreated. Struggles, sometimes important ones, went and are still going on, however the movement never reached the level of the period between May 2010 and February the 12th 2012, which has been the last really huge demonstration. One reason for this setback was definitely the easy solution that SYRIZA proposed: wait for the election to vote for a left, anti-austerity government. SYRIZA has not been an expression of the rising mass movement, but an expression of its fatigue and deceleration. And it has also been a reason for this deceleration.

Was there any strategic alternative to the proposal for a left government?

During the peak of the mass movement in Greece, and especially after June 2011, both SYRIZA and the Communist Party (KKE) rushed to ask for elections. SYRIZA finally proved to be more convincing, because, unlike KKE, they promised a left government that would abolish the austerity agreements (memoranda). This promise was not only fraudulent, but also harmful, as it fostered passive anticipation and the assignment of the struggle against austerity to a parliamentary leadership. Ever since 2011, SYRIZA has been declaring that the mass movement has shown its limit, and it is time to give a “political” (that is, electoral) solution.

But no government can save the people, if the people are not organized and determined to save themselves. The calls of OKDE-Spartakos and other anticapitalist groups for generalized self-organization was confronted with skepticism or sarcasm by the majority of the left, who argued that it would be invented and utopian to speak of councils or Soviets in a situation where such things simply don't exist. Soviets, or anything else, will never exist if nobody proposes them. However, it was not true that self-organization structures did not exist. The Syntagma square hosted a daily people's assembly for nearly two months. The assembly formed sub-committees charged with various tasks. A self-organized radio station was installed on the square. Several every-day popular assemblies were created in different neighborhoods of Athens and in almost all relatively big cities of the country. People were asking: what if we had not a parliament which we vote for every 4 years? How else could power be organized?

It was possible to build an alternative proposal based on those, limited but actual and important, experiences of self-organization. It was possible to call for assemblies in workplaces as well. It was possible to propose that local assemblies elect their revocable representatives and turn the Syntagma Square into a national assembly. It was possible to explain that this assembly represents working people much better than the parliament and the government, and should thus claim power for itself. It was possible, even if very hard, to put forward a concrete revolutionary perspective. But SYRIZA could only fiercely oppose this perspective, and the Communist Part as well. The anticapitalist left did try, but it was still weak and not well prepared.

Was SYRIZA something different from a reformist party?

Militants coming from revolutionary Marxism have developed a large spectrum of theories to deny the reformist character of SYRIZA before it took power, in order to justify their support to the party. They were those who saw an anticapitalist party in SYRIZA. Alan Thornett was definitely not the only one who could claim that “the leadership of SYRIZA wants to trigger the overthrow of capitalism” as late as the eve of the accession of the party to power in 2015 (A. Thornett, 8 Apr 2014 [The significance of Syriza](#)). Today, the experience of the SYRIZA-ANEL government makes it needless to confront the embarrassing idea that the leadership of SYRIZA ever wanted to overthrow capitalism.

A different idea was that SYRIZA represents a new kind of reformism where “bureaucratic crystallization is not as strong as it is in the leaderships of the Communist parties of Europe” (F. Sabado 25 Apr 2013, [A few remarks on the question of government](#)). Our remarks that this is not exactly true were ignored. In terms of party bureaucracy, the leadership around Tsipras proved much more indisputable than the leaderships of the social-democratic PASOK or the right New Democracy. “But it lacked links to the state bureaucracy”, the same comrades retorted. This was no more correct. In relation to its small size, SYRIZA had a large number of long-time national or local deputies, municipal councilors, cadres in the state’s apparatus, in the administration of universities etc. The only reason why the party was not more actively involved in the management of the system is that it was very small, and nobody would offer them this opportunity. However, as soon as SYRIZA appeared ready to win the election, it immediately adopted entire sectors of the social-democratic state, local government and unionist bureaucracy. As for its will to manage the system, there was nothing exceptional in the reformism of SYRIZA.

Was the program of SYRIZA a “grain of sand in the machinery” of the system?

The program of SYRIZA was getting more and more conservative and rudimentary before the party came to power. The celebrated Thessaloniki program of 2014 already rejected a large part of the program of 2012, and the program of January 2015 already refrained from the promises of the Thessaloniki program. But, of course, none of the modest promises of this last program were applied by the SYRIZA government. The international supporters of SYRIZA were blind to the constant programmatic cutback. They supported an “emergency plan”, failing to see that not even that would be even achievable since SYRIZA was committed to the bourgeois and imperialist institutions as well as to private property and the rules of capitalist economy. They defended the supposed position of SYRIZA for “no sacrifice for the euro” and failed to see that behind the rejection of the demand for rupture with the euro and the EU, there was no anti-nationalist purpose but only unwillingness to break with any capitalist institution. As soon as it won the elections, SYRIZA made it clear that its real slogan was “any sacrifice for the euro”. As for their supposed anti-nationalist sentiments, SYRIZA formed a government with the nationalist right party of Independent Greeks (ANEL).

The enthusiasm of the international SYRIZA supporters made them see promises as already accomplished facts. Wishful thinking turned into pure fiction. According to a member of the Fourth International Bureau, SYRIZA was a “grain of sand in the machinery”, as it “returned the legal minimum wage to its former level (751 euros)”, “dissolved the entity created by the Troika to manage privatisations” and “cancelled the sale of the ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki” (E. Toussaint 12 Feb 2015, [Syriza: “A grain of sand in the machinery”](#)). Of course, none of these ever happened, and the government never claimed any of those reforms. As soon as it was elected, the SYRIZA government started negotiating with the bourgeois class and the international capitalist institutions, and soon totally aligned with them. This was dictated by its reformist character, and was thus absolutely predictable. There is nothing exceptional in the reformism of SYRIZA regarding this issue, as well: in the crucial moment, reformism backs the capitalist camp. On the IV website, we have read several times that “the comrades of the KKE and ANTARSYA made an elementary error in seeing SYRIZA’s proposal for a left government as something that would simply manage capitalism” (R. Fidler, 17 Aug 2015, [Greece: Was, and Is There, an Alternative?](#)). Now, in the light of the experience of the SYRIZA government, who made an “elementary error”?

Would the election of a left government bring self-confidence and combativity to the people?

Another usual justification for the support to SYRIZA was that, even if a SYRIZA government could not confront

austerity, it could raise class self-confidence and trigger mass mobilizations, or even a pre-revolutionary situation. In the words of a comrade who was convinced that a “Syriza-led anti-austerity government of the left” would be “a workers’ government in Marxist parlance”, “a pre-revolutionary situation could quickly emerge if Syriza is elected and implements its programme (A. Thornett, 16 June 2012 [Spectacular stakes in the Greek elections](#)). This abstract scenario was utterly refuted by facts. No progressive reforms or “emergency” measures were implemented. SYRIZA’s broken promises did not bring combativity, but disillusionment and confusion. Passivity and parliamentary expectations, both nurtured by SYRIZA and its supporters, had rendered the people unprepared for a new round of strikes. The resistance of the working class against the introduction of the 3rd austerity pact (memorandum) in July 2015 was weaker than the one against the 1st and the 2nd memoranda. The situation got worse afterwards. The pension reform of 2016 and the 4th austerity pact of May 2017 were imposed with almost no reaction. Social anger will probably explode again, and we are counting on that. But it is undoubted that the SYRIZA government did not favor workers’ mobilization. On the contrary, it was the government that managed to restrain, and thus suppress, social and workers’ reactions more than any previous one amid the crisis.

Do workers and the people trust those who stand alongside them in reformist projects?

One of the innumerable arguments that always concluded that everybody should support SYRIZA is that, if SYRIZA fails to deliver on its promises, its base will revolt and follow the left wing of the party. People would trust the left wing more than the anticapitalist opposition outside SYRIZA, because it is with the former that they have fought together for years. A very old and dogmatic concept was repeated here: revolutionaries should stand alongside the working class in labour parties so as to gain their trust, and be ready to lead them out of those parties when the leadership betrays them. However, SYRIZA was never a massive party, with a vivid internal life and strong bonds between the leadership and the rank and file. The period is not the same anymore, neither are parties. The above abstract scenario failed altogether. The Left Platform of SYRIZA did create a split and leave the party after the 3rd memorandum to create Popular Unity. But they only attracted a small minority of the SYRIZA members. A large part among those who left SYRIZA is not in Popular Unity. Even more, Popular Unity has been in a constant state of crisis ever since its creation. Organizations and tendencies abandon the project one after another, and the party is in no position to take any substantial initiative. The rank and file of SYRIZA did not trust them, and why would they, since the leadership of Popular Unity has always been an organic part of SYRIZA, including four first-class ministers in its first cabinet. The crisis of the Popular Unity is far worse than the pressures which ANTARSYA (the anticapitalist left front), the Communist Party of anarchist groups suffer because of the setback in the mass movement. Being long-time members of SYRIZA did not help the Popular Unity be a massive party. On the contrary, to not have been in SYRIZA is not an obstacle when we approach former SYRIZA militants in the mass movement. We respect militants who left SYRIZA to join Popular Unity and want to work with them in the mass movement, but we don’t approve their political project for a “patriotic anti-austerity front” and for a second, honest SYRIZA.

Did the leadership of the Fourth International support SYRIZA?

It has been recently claimed by members of the Fourth International Bureau that the FI leadership never officially supported SYRIZA. However, this is unfortunately not correct. In fact, all international revolutionary leaderships with some influence, with maybe only a couple of exceptions, supported SYRIZA.

The CWI and IMT did it in every official way possible, since being part of broad reformist parties is an instrumental element of their politics. However, currents that are typically building a project for independent anticapitalist formations have also actually backed SYRIZA in Greece, even contrary to the position of their Greek sections.

Although the Greek IST section (SEK) participates in ANTARSYA and never joined or voted for SYRIZA, pronounced members of the British SWP expressed their direct or indirect support to SYRIZA. Even after the formation of the SYRIZA-ANEL government, Callinicos maintained that “revolutionary socialists should celebrate the new government’s victory and support the progressive measures it takes” (even if it took none) and thought that it is “great” to have “senior ministers coming from the left wing of SYRIZA”, although recognizing it is also risky (A. Callinicos in a debate with Stathis Kouvelakis, [“Syriza and socialist strategy - Stathis Kouvelakis and Alex Callinicos”](#)). Even Altamira of the Argentinian Partido Obrero and the CRFI called for a vote to SYRIZA “under the banner of a rupture with the EU, for the United Socialist States, for a workers’ government” in the 11th Congress of the PO, although the Greek section of the CRFI followed an independent project.

Unfortunately, the case was even worse with the Fourth International leadership. Renown members have repeatedly visited Greece as invited speakers in SYRIZA meetings, without consulting or even informing the Greek section. FI cadres served as economic advisors to Tsipras and as close collaborators to the former SYRIZA President of the Parliament Zoe Konstantopoulou. The current Minister of the State and Government Spokesperson, Tzanakopoulos, takes pride in having been a member of the British section a few years ago, while being a first-class cadre of SYRIZA at the same time.

The official positions of the Fourth International Bureau were more cautious, but in fact no less explicit. The Bureau’s permanent position was that anticapitalists should join SYRIZA or an alliance led by SYRIZA, for a left anti-austerity government. In May 2012, it stated clearly that everybody should unite under the emergency programme of SYRIZA: “The Fourth International calls on the whole of the international workers’ movement, on all the indignant, on all those who defend the ideals of the Left, to support such an emergency programme...we call for the coming together of all the forces which are fighting against austerity in Greece – Syriza, Antarsya, the KKE, the trade unions and the other social movements – around an emergency plan” (FI Bureau Statement, 24 May 2012, [The future of the workers of Europe is being decided in Greece](#)). In its reply to the letter of the Greek section, who complained about this statement, the FI Bureau was clear: “Our answer, like that of almost all the sections of the International, is clear: it is necessary to support Syriza” (9 June 2012).

The FI leadership position was not much different in 2015. Before the January election that brought SYRIZA to power, a series of top FI cadres, including Bureau members, co-signed an international call titled “With the Greek people, for a change in Europe – A call launched in the Spanish State”, which was actually a call for a vote to SYRIZA and did not even mention ANTARSYA, the project where the Greek section is engaged (9 Jan 2015, [With the Greek people, for a change in Europe – A call launched in the Spanish State](#)). The statement of the Secretariat of the Bureau a few days afterwards said: “The various components of Syriza, their members in the trade unions – in collaboration, often, with militants of the Antarsya coalition, the student movement, etc. - are the vectors of these mobilizations. Syriza and Antarsya have particular responsibility in building a unitive project” and urged “to do everything so that the Greek left, of which Syriza is the main component, wins these elections, in order to create a social and political dynamic for a left government” (12 Jan 2015, [Fourth International: On 25 January, a turning point for Greece and Europe!](#)). There is no doubt that this equals an official call for a vote to SYRIZA and a suggestion that ANTARSYA should also join its project. After the election of the SYRIZA government, the FI leadership advocated a policy of “Critical” support to the government, and the decision of the Greek section to build a working class left opposition was rejected, on the pretext that only the bourgeois class opposes SYRIZA.

Even on the eve of the SYRIZA “betrayal” and after the experience of six months of shameful negotiations with the capitalist and imperialist institutions, the Fourth International Bureau could not draw a clear conclusion about the nature of the SYRIZA-ANEL government. The Greek section’s warning that SYRIZA would introduce a new austerity pact no matter the result of the referendum of July 5 was ignored. The Greek section fought for the NO with all its forces, but it simultaneously declared no confidence to the government. On the contrary, the statement of the FI Bureau praised the SYRIZA government and called the people to support it once again: “the interests of the exploited classes in Europe do not lie behind the governments who run the European Union, but on the side of the Greek

people and of Syriza, who are fighting austerity. Resistance to austerity is possible. The victories of Syriza, like the advances of Podemos in the Spanish state, show the road to take in all the countries of Europe.” It invited the workers of all Europe to “mobilize alongside the Greek social and political movement in opposition to austerity, alongside the Greek government” (7 July 2015, [The victory of the "no" announces decisive battles against the Troika](#)). This statement was relentlessly ridiculed less than one week afterwards, when the SYRIZA government approved the new austerity pact (3rd memorandum). No balance sheet was ever drawn of this huge mistake. On the contrary, the majority of the leadership of the FI shifted its support to the Popular Unity, once again ignoring the suggestions of the Greek section that the newly formed party wants to repeat the SYRIZA project anew (see the joint statement of O. Besançon, M. Urbán and A. Davanellos of the Popular Unity for the September 2015 elections, 19 Sept 2015, [Time for an exit from austerity](#)).

Unfortunately, we have to admit that the FI leadership, as well as the leaderships of most international revolutionary currents, have uncritically supported SYRIZA, and thus bear their own responsibility for having helped SYRIZA hegemonize the social current that arose against austerity, which induced passivity among the working class, false electoral expectations and, finally, a disaster. This development could be foreseen, and the Greek section foresaw it. This is why the section dedicated its modest forces to an independent anticapitalist current that remained out of SYRIZA, its crisis and its degradation. This project has helped avoid a situation of complete collapse of the left and workers organizations, as happened in other countries who experienced governments of the left or with the participation of the left. The independent anticapitalist left in Greece is a first material to start our counter-attack with.

Greece calls for a balance sheet. But no balance sheet will be honest, as far as it avoids the main conclusion: the need for political and organizational independence from reformism.

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