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Greece

# The situation in the run up to the elections

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**In the run up to the crucial elections in Greece at the end of the month, we publish an interview conducted by *Sozialistische Zeitung* with Panos Petrou from International Workers Left (DEA) before the failed attempts to elect a president, or the parliamentary elections were finally called. [1]**

**SoZ: There was a general strike in Greece on November 27 which was massively supported. But apart from this we in Germany have heard very little news about social struggles in Greece during the last months. Could you give us an impression about the present situation concerning social struggles and protest movements in Greece?**

**PP:** The protest movement is at a low level, at least compared with the massive, militant resistance we have witnessed in 2010-12. The lack of concrete material victories during that time, and the exhaustion after months in the streets and in strike actions, led to a rise of electoralism. People hope to achieve through the ballot (with the vote for SYRIZA) what they couldn't achieve with their struggles. This was not inevitable, and theories that tend to blame the workers for being passive are wrong. The leaderships of the political Left and the trade-unions have some serious responsibilities for the current situation.

But we are not witnessing a defeat of the resistance movement. Local, smaller, bitter struggles persist. The workers of [the public radio station] ERT, the heroic cleaning ladies that are on the streets for months, laid-off public sector workers (like school guards who marched on their feet from Thessaloniki to Athens) who will keep mobilizing until they are re-instated are some important examples. We should also mention the successful campaign of "civil disobedience" by public sector workers, who refused to take part in the "evaluation program" (which would serve as a justification for new layoffs).

More recently, the solidarity movement for the Syrian refugees who were on hunger strike, camped in Syntagma Square and the solidarity movement for the young anarchist Nikos Romanos who was on hunger strike (demanding the "education leaves" from prison that the state refused to provide him), proved that the governments' attempt to build a conservative, right-wing, "law and order" hegemony has failed.

These last two struggles also served as an example of determination and active solidarity, which are values and attitudes that are needed for the workers' struggles too. All these struggles are important because they keep this "electoralism" in a left-wing direction. Meaning that it is not a vote out of despair, but a "popular mandate" to reverse austerity.

**SoZ: How strong is the support for "Golden Dawn" at the moment.? Are they seriously weakened or are they still a force which enjoys strong support in the population?**

**PP:** Golden Dawn is facing problems. The persecution of its leadership (and nazis always function in a rigid "top-down" organization), the withdrawal of the scandalous protection they enjoyed from the state until the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, and the massive antifascist mobilizations that followed the murder have led to a situation where the neonazis are not only unable to continue their murderous activities, but also unable to take any kind of political initiatives in general. Their demonstrations to support the persecuted leadership gather only a few hundred people, the "hard-core". Their previous electoral rise has halted, and maybe it is declining, we cannot know for sure (they are polling from 4 to 7%).

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But they still enjoy the persistent (after everything that happened) support of a serious part of the population. So they remain a threat for the (near) future, if the ruling class decides to use them again.

The trials can serve as the “bargaining table” for the future of Golden Dawn (for example: conviction of some members, acquittal of others, and the emergence of a “purified” Golden Dawn or parts of Golden Dawn participating in a recomposition of the far-right, a project that is already promoted by certain far-right politicians like Takis Baltakos, the “right-hand” of Samaras who was proved to have serious contacts with the neonazi leadership).

That is why we insist that antifascist mobilization must continue, both during the trials, and in general during all the coming period.

**SoZ: The election of the new president is scheduled for December. According to our information it is not probable that Dimas, the candidate of Samaras and Venizelos, will get the necessary votes. We have the impression that in Greece there is already an election campaign going on. What are the most important issues in the controversy between the government of the right and SYRIZA?**

**PP:** The main choice is between austerity and its reversal, either continuing to implement the policies that the creditors and the local ruling class demands or making a stand against them. And this is the left-wing argument in this electoral campaign.

Of course the government, its international allies and the mass media are trying to shift the debate in a different direction. The government is supposed to represent stability while SYRIZA is accused as a force that will lead to chaos.

The ruling class (and consequently its political personnel) has lost the ability to hegemonize, meaning to represent its interests as the interests of the society as a whole. So they try to represent SYRIZA as the biggest and only threat to society. They have resorted to a scare campaign that tries to argue that “all your sacrifices will be for nothing if SYRIZA gets elected and leads to chaos, things will get a lot worse”. The scare campaign sometimes takes a grotesque Cold-War style, against “the red threat that will destroy the nation”. A SYRIZA victory is represented in the mass media as some sort of apocalypse.

**SoZ: Our impression is that SYRIZA has considerable “softened” its original programme. Taking over the banks is no longer a goal of Tsipras. That also seems to be the case concerning stopping the payment of debt. Can you outline the present main demands of SYRIZA?**

**PP:** Tsipras has presented the “immediate program”, meaning not the full policy of SYRIZA but the first priorities of a left-wing government and the program around which it will ask for the people’s vote in this election. This program has some aspects that are very important: raising the minimum wage, re-instating some cut pensions, re-instating collective contracts and bargaining rights for the unions, re-instating laid off public sector workers, cancellation of some taxes that hit the popular classes etc. These are accompanied with some measures to “restructure” the state. But at the same time the future of the banks (or the privatized state enterprises) was not mentioned at all. On the debt issue, indeed “stopping the payment” is downplayed and the emphasis is given on “negotiation and a European solution”. But at the same time it was stated that the implementation of SYRIZA’s program is not up for negotiation and that the “surplus” of the budget cannot go to debt repayment.

The bottom line is that the leadership is trying to argue that its program will be a “win-win” situation (protecting workers while gaining the approval of the capitalists that will not be harmed). That is why it is softening its rhetoric, downplaying all issues that are considered an immediate “attack” on capital. And yet, no matter what the leadership

of SYRIZA wish for, the measures described above will be perceived as an “act of war” from the local and international bourgeoisie.

**SoZ: Will a future Tsipras government be ready to support the building up of popular mass movements? Or will they try to contain such movements to come to an agreement with the “investor-community” and the Troika?**

**PP:** Everyone in SYRIZA argues that “without the people on the streets, few things can be done”. But what is not clear is whether we all agree that – for this reason – we need to mobilize and organize or that – for this reason “few things will be done”. During the past months, SYRIZA has failed (and sometimes didn’t even try) to play the role of the organizer of protest movements. SYRIZA members are always present in struggle, but the party as a whole didn’t engage with these tasks in a co-ordinated, conscious way. So, I cannot predict, but this could be the case the day after an electoral victory. But I don’t think that a SYRIZA government would actually try to contain the social movements. And even if it tried, it would probably fail to do such a thing. First of all, it doesn’t have the control over the unions and the social movements, like the old powerful social-democratic or communist parties. And secondly, the party activists, and cadres would not tolerate such an effort. What I know is that if a left-wing government tries to contain the social movements, it will actually “saw the branch on which it sits”, and this reality will be another factor that a SYRIZA government should keep in mind.

**SoZ: What are the main political controversies between the SYRIZA leadership and the Left Platform at the moment?**

**PP:** The issues mentioned above, around the banking sector, the re-nationalization of privatized state enterprises and the cessation of debt repayments as a “weapon in our arsenal” are things that the Left Platform is arguing that they should be part of our program. But the main controversy lately has been the issue of political alliances. The Left Platform insists that our only allies are on the Left, meaning the Communist Party and ANTARSYA. The leadership insists talking vaguely about some sort of “broad unity” that goes “beyond the ranks of the Left”, while refusing to make clear what this means.

That is why we push for the slogan “left-wing government”, instead of some new formulations like “government of social salvation” that are open to various interpretations. Apart from the future alliances with other parties, this issue was raised recently around the candidates with the SYRIZA ballot. The Democratic Left, former socialdemocrats or some “repentant” centere-right MPss are trying to “jump on the train”. This is a very controversial issue not only for the Left Platform, but for thousands of SYRIZA members, beyond party tendencies and affiliations.

Last but not least, the left-wing is arguing against recent efforts to “neutralize” the functioning of collective organs of the party and turn it into an “electoral machine”.

**SoZ: What are the main political tasks for a future left government? What is the opinion of DEA and the Left Platform?**

**PP:** The reversal of austerity, the “reconquest” of everything that was lost during years and years of neoliberalism. A left-wing government should act as a force of “class unilateralism”. It must commit to serve workers’ and poor peoples’ interests and not some vague concepts like “the country” or “the economy”. In this process, it should declare “war on capital”. Those responsible for the crisis, those who still benefit from it, must finally pay. And even to implement some mild pro-worker reforms, such a confrontation will be inevitable, no matter what are the wishes of a left-wing government. To confront blackmails, economic sabotage, international strangulation etc, a left-wing government should be ready and willing to counterattack with measures against capitalist “liberties” and their power

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over the economy. Of course we are aware that to implement such measures, it will be crucial for the Left (all the forces of the Left) to mobilize the workers movement, the only force capable to neutralize the power of capital. In the times of neoliberalism, and even more so in the midst of the deep crisis, there is no “middle ground” or “win-win scenarios”. Capitalists don’t negotiate a thing, and any effort to compromise would lead to capitulation.

DEA understands the election of a left-wing government as a starting point for a new period of intense class struggle. The left-wing government should use its position to push forward such a struggle, but no matter what it will or will not do, we understand that its very presence in office will be a “destabilizing” factor, and that the extraparliamentary struggles will be the crucial “field” that we should focus our activities, if we want this “adventure” to end not with a strategic defeat but with a historical working-class victory.

**SoZ: What are the positions of other left groups (KKE, ANTARSYA) towards a SYRIZA government? Do they “critically support” a SYRIZA government or do they oppose it?**

**PP:** The line of the Communist Party is becoming more and more sectarian as we move to the elections and as the prospect of a SYRIZA government is getting closer. Sometimes its leadership spends more time attacking SYRIZA than the government. Unfortunately ANTARSYA over the past months retreated even from the unity in action that was established in the past in some workplaces or neighborhoodsneighbourhoods etc. These comrades seem to have concluded that SYRIZA will inevitably betray and fail and refuse to engage in the battle to avoid this scenario.

Of course I believe that many communists understand the importance of a left-wing government, and I also believe that there are many non-sectarian comrades in ANTARSYA. I want to believe that a position of “critical support” could prevail after the election.

From our part (DEA and the Left Platform) we insist that – despite the different electoral tactics – the United Front of the Left will be a crucial task for the coming period. The trade-union forces of the Communist Party and the very militant comrades of ANTARSYA are very important allies in the coming confrontation.

I believe that we – and many more SYRIZA members – will be active in the same struggles with all these comrades, supporting any positive measures by a left-wing government, defending it from right-wing attacks, pushing for more radical policies, supporting the workers struggles when the left-wing government neglects their interests.

**SoZ: How important is international solidarity for a future left government in Greece? Are there any signs for an “alliance of the south” especially with Spain?**

**PP:** It will be absolutely crucial. In the face of international blackmails and strangulation, of course SYRIZA should hold its ground and the people should mobilize, but to win against such forces, the international mobilization of the Left and the working class in defence of a left-wing government that is trying to break through the neoliberal prison that have been built in the European Union could be a decisive factor in the end.

The Greek ruling class has powerful allies in Brussels, Berlin, London, Paris, Washington etc. We will need our own allies, demonstrating and struggling in the streets of these capitals. Of course a future left-wing government has the task to provide an example that will be truly worth defending. If that will be the case, then it will be up to our comrades, and class brothers and sisters around Europe to fight on our side.

That is the way we understand the effort to avoid isolation: not seeking for possible alliances with parts of the ruling class of this or that country for a supposed “European New Deal”, but building solidarity from below, in a common

struggle of the workers against the neoliberal EU.

In our view, the so-called “alliance of the South” should be understood that way. There are no “common interests” with Matteo Renzi, François Hollande or Mariano Rajoy, who attack the workers of the South. But we stand together with the workers and the left in these countries. We argue that Greece is the “weak link”, that can lead to the break-up of the chain.

The counterattack of the working class and the Left can begin in one country, but it can be completed and successful only internationally. This prospect may seem far today, but I believe that the “wildfire” can spread. The rise of Podemos is such an example that we welcome wholeheartedly.

**SoZ: Are there any special topics which the German left should emphasize in the coming months ?**

**PP:** Confronting the mainstream propaganda and scare tactics around the possibility of a SYRIZA victory would be helpful. We need to break the divide between the workers of the “South” and the “North”. As we fight against “anti-Germanism”, explaining that German workers are not to blame for what Merkel is doing, you could argue against the myth of “lazy Greek workers”, explain that SYRIZA is not a threat to German workers, austerity is. Raising this awareness will be important as a first step for the crucial battles ahead of us.

In the international solidarity against efforts to strangle a left-wing government, we understand that the working class and the Left in Germany will play a very important role, as you are struggling “in the belly of the beast”. As we are heading to a confrontation with the dictates of Brussels and the “creditors”, raising your voices against the neoliberal structure of the EU and against these “creditors” will be important. And of course, your struggle against your government, will be the best contribution to our common struggle.

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[1] The interview will appear in [Sozialistische Zeitung 2/2015](#).