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Greece

Polarisation in Syriza as democracy undermined in Greece

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Red Flag's Colleen Bolger has recently returned from Athens, where she has been reporting on the political turmoil in Greece. Her previous dispatches, along with other articles and stat

Greek democracy is in grave danger. The IMF envoy to Athens has declared that the government's proposed cuts do not go far enough. Brussels technocrats are taking up residence to oversee the administration of Greek political and economic life.

A condition of the bailout is that no legislation can be passed without first showing it to the lenders' representatives. There is also pressure to rescind legislation passed prior to the conclusion of the bailout agreement. The Greek banking system is being kept on a tight leash.

The vilification of those who voted against the agreement has increased in intensity.

Stooges of the right have initiated legal proceedings against former finance minister Yanis Varoufakis. Kathimerini newspaper published a transcript of a Varoufakis phone call, during which he explained that he investigated a temporary payment system in case Greece were forced out of the eurozone. The right allege that this amounts to treason.

Similarly, the media have sensationalised a Syriza Left Platform meeting that discussed how the government could cope with an exit from the eurozone. They report this as a nefarious "plot" hatched by communist relics of a bygone-era.

The contradiction, as others have pointed out, is that the media and the right wing accuse the left of having no practical alternative to Tsipras's capitulation and also claim that the consideration of any alternative plan is a secret conspiracy. In fact, the Left Platform has made a consistent and open argument about the need to nationalise the banks and other sections of industry.

That Varoufakis has, in a matter of weeks, gone from being an object of awe to being hounded reflects that the right, so discredited after the referendum, is thriving on Tsipras's about-face on the bailout. Varoufakis explained in the phone call that German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble's real aim in negotiations with Greece was to impose discipline on the rest of the continent:

"He believes there has to be some fiscal transfers; some degree of political union. He believes that for that political union to work without federation, without the legitimacy that a properly elected federal parliament can render, can bestow upon an executive, it will have to be done in a very disciplinary way.

"And he said explicitly to me that a Grexit is going to equip him with sufficient bargaining, sufficient terrorising power in order to impose upon the French that which Paris has been resisting. And what is that? A degree of transfer of budget making powers from Paris to Brussels."

The ongoing struggle in Syriza

To a casual observer, Tsipras might appear to have been completely transformed – from fiery orator when addressing hundreds of thousands of people in Syntagma Square during the referendum campaign, to a beaten man who returned from Brussels with a memorandum he said he did not believe in, and finally to a statesman typical of any other.

Tsipras was never the likely hero and saviour. The radical left always knew this. His change in posture is not so surprising, but it is nevertheless considerable. He has presided over the signing of an agreement pledging support to the Israeli military, he met the Egyptian junta leader president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and he employs crass innuendo against the left.

Tsipras scored an important victory against the left at a 30 July Syriza central committee meeting. The left pushed for a party conference of the standing delegates to take place before the agreement is finally ratified at the parliamentary sitting on 18 August. Instead, the conference will take place in September, which, as Left Platform leader Panagiotis Lafazanis said in a statement published on the website *Iskra*, “makes no sense, as the participants will be asked to ratify a *fait accompli*”.

The left had hoped to consolidate the opposition to the agreement, which earlier was expressed in a statement signed by a majority of the central committee prior to the parliamentary vote on 15 July.

In the meeting, Tsipras reiterated the narrative that there was no alternative to signing the agreement, that it would be worse to have New Democracy or Pasok in office and a setback for the first government of the left to fall so soon. This appeal to prop up the government no matter what has traction among those for whom parliamentary manoeuvring is more critical than struggle – in this case a grouping known as “the 53”, which originally was in the party majority.

There is little pressure being brought to bear on the waverers from outside of the party – it will take time for the struggle in the streets and in workplaces to regain its potency. Members of the 53 had signed the original statement of opposition, but declared a moratorium on conflict within the party on the morning of 30 July.

Nonetheless, in the course of the meeting, 17 central committee members resigned. All were supporters of the ex-Maoist KOE group. While the outcome of the meeting was to close off the possibility of the left winning a majority of the party, the fight is not over. The left has not been subdued. Opposition has in fact hardened.

The Left Current (a sub group of the Left Platform) held a rally in a sports stadium in central Athens on 27 July. Lafazanis addressed up to 2,000 supporters. During his speech, which was punctuated by chants of “Oxi!” (Greek for “no”), from the crowd, he argued that the alternative to the agreement was in the party program. Speaking of the overwhelming numbers of young people that had voted “no” in the referendum, he recalled the youth wing of the communist-led resistance, EPON, and called on the youth to be the new generation for the “no”.

Others who spoke included Antonis Davanellos of Syriza’s Red Network; Manolis Glezos, recently retired member of the European Parliament for Syriza, and famous for removing the swastika from the Acropolis during the WWII Nazi occupation; and Petros Papakonstantinou of Antarsya, the anti-capitalist coalition. The Red Network has also held meetings in regions outside Athens and a Left Platform event will be held in Thessaloniki soon.

The right wing has also hardened its stance. Government spokesperson Olga Gerovasili told reporters after the central committee meeting: “At the moment there are two different strategies competing in the same party: one that wants Greece inside the euro and the other that wants Greece outside the Euro. These two can’t exist together at the government level”. After the vote, deputy prime minister and member of the party’s right Yannis Dragasakis said: “I

hope that we are heading for the refoundation of a new party”.

The 18 August vote will take place after negotiations with the lenders and just two days prior to the next loan payment. It will be another showdown between the left and the majority. Tsipras might call an election, which would raise the question of who the candidates will be. He has the power to determine the list. There will also be the conference in September, and the election of delegates at a district level.

It is the height of the summer holidays now as people return to their families for the Assumption festival on 15 August. But flash points are not far off.

The political struggle matters

Rebuilding the struggle in the streets and workplaces is vital. A meeting of 250 activists and unionist from both the Left Platform and Antarsya was held in Athens on 28 July to establish “No until the end committees”. The report from the meeting states: “It is obvious to everyone that a massive resurgence of the labour-popular movement is an immediate necessity to shift political and economic developments ... in order to finally reverse the memorandum”.

The creation of these committees is a concrete step toward rebuilding the broader struggle. It is made possible by the cooperation between activists and revolutionaries both within and outside of Syriza. Six hundred and fifty unionists and activists have signed on to the initial call for the creation of these committees. At the meeting, activists also called a demonstration to coincide with the 18 August parliamentary vote and a demonstration at the annual trade fair in Thessaloniki in September.

But the struggle has ebbed from its heights in 2011 and 2012. Among the mass of the population there is fear that there is no alternative to the government’s agreement with the creditors – and if there is an alternative, uncertainty about what it is.

In these circumstances, the political struggle within Syriza matters. The debates between the left and right of the party are decisive to rebuilding the movement.

For the last three years, the party has surged forward and greatly increased its influence within the working class. To the extent that people can bring themselves to stay engaged in politics after the capitulation, they are attuned to whether the whole party is going to go along with it.

In so politicised a society as Greece, people remember the positions of different groups – even when they do not agree with them at first. Coming from Australia, I am used to answering questions about communism in terms of whether a revolution is possible or what it may look like etc. Here, there are many groups from the broad communist tradition. They are judged by the answers they give to the questions of today.

For example, I came across two Algerian migrants discussing the Communist Party’s position of opposing austerity but maintaining membership of the eurozone. Impossible, the two agree. Like most people I have spoken to outside of the organised left, they know the positions of the various groups and their key spokespeople.

When I joined the discussion, they said that now is not like it was back in 2010 or 2011 or those times in Palestine when you had people out on the street every day. The politicisation lacks the intensity it previously had. There is five

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years' accumulated learning in mass consciousness but the lessons of the left government are yet to be understood on a mass level.

The debate within Syriza and its outcome are important for distilling these lessons and setting up the next phase of the struggle on clearer political foundations. In turn, rebuilding the struggle can give confidence to left activists in the opposition of Syriza to continue to fight. These poles are not counterposed. To force a counterposition – “all Syriza and forget the struggle”, or “all struggle and forget Syriza” – is a mistake.

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