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Greece

The significance of Syriza

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Greece has been and remains the epicentre of the crisis on European a scale. It has been turned, by the European elites, into a laboratory for austerity policies that are designed to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis. Greek society has been torn apart in the process.

Its GDP and industrial production have plummeted, as has the standard of living. Welfare has been destroyed. Unemployment has reached record levels with women and young people the worst hit. Protective labour laws and regulations have been scrapped. Health and social services have been decimated.

The Greek working class also has been and remains the epicentre of resistance to austerity Europe-wide. There have been multiple general strikes and multiple sectional strikes. There have been repeated demonstrations and protests, neighbourhood mobilisations, occupations and social movements. Despite the fact that such struggles continue the brutal terms of the Memorandum continue to be forced through.

The rise of Syriza

The political reflection of this resistance has been the spectacular rise of Syriza out of the wreckage of PASOK in the wake PASOK's disastrous support for the Memorandum and the European elites. It is the most important example in Europe today of the role a broad left party can play under conditions of crisis and heightened class struggle. It is a hugely significant development for the European workers movement and for the European left.

Syriza's rise has been spectacular. After reaching around 4% in the polls it rose rapidly in the run up to the 2012 general elections (in May and June) and in June it won 27% of the vote, only narrowly failing to get elected. It refused any coalition arrangement with pro-austerity or right wing parties and became the official opposition. A right wing government was formed of the pro-Memorandum parties that lacked legitimacy or popular support but continued to drive through austerity.

Since the 2012 election Syriza has increased its support and is now top of the polls, with around 30 – 32 percent of the vote. It could well come top in both the Euro-elections and the local elections in May and it is best placed to win the next general election whenever it takes place. This could come at any time, since although an election is not imminent the government is unlikely to survive its full term until 2016. Syriza is, in effect, a radical left wing anti-austerity government in waiting.

The symbolic candidacy of Alexis Tsipras as European Left Party candidate for the European Commission Presidency is an attempt to highlight the role Syriza is playing and can potentially play at the European level.

All this makes Syriza by far the most important example of the role a broad party of the left can play in the present period as social democracy moves further to the right. It vindicates the policy that we (as the FI) have pursued for many years for the construction of such parties. The fact that a Syriza led government in Greece could change the political situation in Europe makes all this hugely important for the European left and the European workers

movement.

Syriza stood, in 2012, on a platform that included the repudiation of the memorandum and the restoration of the cuts, the socialisation of the banks and major industries, the restoration of the minimum wage and collective agreements, and a debt audit to prepare for a moratorium on repayments. It has not changed its platform since then although it has been discussing how it would defend such policies when in office and under attack.

The role of the Greek left

Although Syriza won a mass support in the Greek working class, however, the Greek left has been deeply divided over it from the outset. There have been divisions over whether to join Syriza, over whether to support it in elections, and even whether to support it if it wins a majority and forms a government. In fact it was these divisions that helped deprive Syriza of a majority in 2012 and put the present government in office.

That the Stalinist KKE opposed Syriza at every level was no surprise. What is more surprising, however, is that sections of the revolutionary left, including the Antarsya coalition—with our own section and the IST section within it—also stood against it in 2012 and intend to do so against it again in the next election.

This was and is a big mistake, in my view. It not only divided the left but it failed to recognise the political significance of a broad party like Syriza and the role it could play in a situation of acute crisis with an enhanced level of class struggle.

This division deprived the workers movement of a governmental dimension of the struggle at a time when the battle in the workplaces, on the streets, and in the neighborhoods had reached an impasse with no breakthrough in sight. When it was clear that the struggle needed a new dynamic which could only be provided by a governmental demand—by a call for a government of the left anti-austerity parties.

In fact Syriza's rise to mass support directly reflected this. Its proposal for an anti-Memorandum government of the left prior to the 2012 elections changed the dynamics of the debate and massively boosted its poll ratings. Suddenly there was a political perspective which could give hope to the Greek working class. A way forwards that reflected Syriza's ability to link a governmental perspective and electoral credibility to support for struggle on the streets and in the work places.

Left reformist or anti-capitalist?

Refusal to support Syriza is often justified on the basis that Syriza is left social democratic (or left reformists) part in character and that as such—i.e. that left social democracy was in the end social democracy—it is bound to betray the working class as soon as it gets to office if not before. Once the label is attached to it the message being projected is clear, betrayal is inevitable. Such a left reformist party, it is argued, can never open up a development beyond capitalism since the closer reformism gets to power the more it will adapt to the capitalist agenda.

Syriza is not a revolutionary party, of course, and has never claimed to be one—which is the factor that gives it mass appeal in the current situation.

I don't think, however, that putting a label of left reformism on Syriza is a useful way of approaching this. If left

reformism is to be defined so broadly as to include everything from the left in the British Labour Party or left Eurocommunism (for example) to those like the leadership of Syriza who want to trigger the overthrow of capitalism but lack a strategic approach to carrying this through, then I don't think such a definition has much value.

I have come to the view that Syriza has more of the characteristics of an anti-capitalist party than a left social democratic one. Most of its members, I suspect, would see both themselves as anti-capitalist and the organisation as anti-capitalist. It also has a big, and organised, far-left/Marxist component within it.

This whole subject, however, lacks clear definition—both in the discourse of the left as a whole and in our own discussions. The border between social democracy per se and left social democracy are as ill defined as are the borders between left social democracy and anti-capitalism. Or, indeed, the definition between an anti capitalist party and a revolutionary party.

As I argued at the IC last year this whole approach of labelling such parties can be too proscriptive. It fails to take into account the political realities in most European countries where the construction of an anti-capitalist party is not at the present time on the agenda. Who will betray and under what circumstances is a complicated business.

Broad parties emerge in response to a political reality, if they don't they won't last very long. The character of such parties is determined by the state of the class struggle, the political conditions at the national level, and the history and shape of the labour movement and the shape and strength of the left. Even parties which come from a revolutionary tradition can betray when the time comes.

Is Syriza moving to the right?

In order to sustain such a critique of Syriza there has been a mini industry, both inside Greece and outside, generating material, collecting quotations etc, to 'prove' that Syriza is moving to the right and that it will ultimately betray. Some even claim that it is already the new PASOK.

This has been the case from the outset—ever since Syriza became the focus for a serious governmental challenge. It is consistent with the logic of standing against Syriza in elections in order to justify your own campaign and build your own vote.

The leaders of Syriza are no doubt daunted by this prospect and by how they will survive after the election, particularly with half the left against them. There is also pressure arising from the need to maintain mass support until the next election takes place. They are aware that they do not have 30% support on the basis of their full programme.

There is little discussion (as far as I can see) as to how a Syriza-led government, if elected, could survive the onslaught that would be launched against by the Greek bourgeoisie and the international and European elites or how to defend it in such a situation—just about how and when it will betray.

I would not claim that Syriza, or its leadership, has made no mistakes or retreats since it found itself in the remarkable situation of being a government in waiting. It would be surprising if it had not. Taking office under such conditions on the basis of the radical programme they stood on in 2012 is uncharted waters. Who could guarantee that they could stand such a test? Not even those who define themselves as revolutionary socialists could guarantee that. I don't accept, however, that it is on a trajectory to the right.

In any case standing on the side-lines and announcing every retreat, or perceived retreat, made by Syriza's leaders is not the most ineffective way of halting such a retreat. In fact it has always been more likely to push Syriza to the

right than prevent it doing so.

Syriza is an open and democratic party. Currents that join it get representation on its leading bodies. The best place, therefore, for those who think that Syriza will move to the right is inside Syriza using its democratic structures to ensure that this does not happen. Syriza already has a strong organised left within it that engages with the majority in the debate over policy.

Whether we join and work inside such a party should be determined by two principal factors. First and most important is whether to do so would advance the struggle of the workers and the oppressed. The second is internal democracy, which is essential if it is to be a party that can have a broad influence in the workers movement – an influence broader than we can have directly as a revolutionary current. Syriza meets all these criteria.

Workers' government

Building broad left parties is not just to provide a political dimension to the struggle against austerity (though they should provide that) it is to provide a governmental alternative in periods of heightened class struggle when the election of such parties becomes possible. It is to open up conditions where such a party, seeking defend the interests of the working class, with mass support on the ground, and with demands which are unacceptable to the ruling elites, can trigger a course of events which can develop into a challenge to capitalism itself.

I think that such a development is entirely possible with the election of a Syriza led government in Greece – though it is far from guaranteed. What is clear is that if Syriza were to implement even a small part of its programme on coming to office this would be totally unacceptable to the Greek bourgeoisie and the European elites. Syriza's anti-austerity pledges alone are totally unacceptable to the elites. In fact under today's conditions in Greece just the rejection of the memorandum is now a transitional demand.

The election of a Syriza led government under such conditions would result in a huge confrontation with Greek capitalism and the European elites that Syriza could only survive by taking radical measures in its own defense.

What is the alternative to such an approach in Greece? The reality of the last three years in Greece is that a long and hard fought struggle has not resulted in the formation of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies and dual power on the streets. What it resulted in was mass support for an anti-austerity government of the left parties via a parliamentary majority.

So what do the left say about it? Do we say that such a government would be a diversion from the real issue which is the formations of workers' and soldiers' councils? Of course not. We say that such a government would be a major gain for the working class and that we will fight to get it into office. We will then fight to defend it (stand with it) against the onslaught from capital and seek by doing so to take the struggle to the next stage.

The debate around the formation of such a government (effectively a provisional government) under such conditions is not new, of course. It was discussed by the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1922, after the immediate revolutionary wave generated by the Russian revolution had receded and the Comintern had to come to terms with the reality that the struggle was going to be a much longer one and that struggles for power would not necessarily follow the soviet model.

What they discussed, therefore, was the united front tactic, transitional demands, and the demand for a workers'

government. A government that comes to office by parliamentary means but is determined to represent the interests of the working class under conditions where capitalism, and the capitalist state, remains intact—where no social overturn has yet taken place. In other words it would be a transitional government.

The proposition advanced by the Comintern was that such a government—elected to office with capitalism still existing—could be the vehicle for developments beyond the limitations that capitalism, despite the restrictions which capitalism would attempt to impose on it—irrespective of whether the leadership of such a government saw itself as playing such a role when it was elected to office.

The resolution on tactics at the Third Congress of the Comintern said the following. In fact it could have been written for the Greek situation today:

“As a general propagandistic slogan, the workers’ government (or workers and peasants government [where peasants exist]) can be used almost anywhere. As an immediate political slogan, however, the workers’ government is most important in countries where bourgeois society is particularly unstable, where the relationship of forces between the workers’ parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the agenda as a practical problem requiring immediate solution. In these countries, the slogan of the workers’ government flows unavoidably from the entire united-front tactic.” [Emphasis original]

It goes on: “Such a workers’ government is possible only if it is born from the struggles of the masses themselves and is supported by militant workers organisations created by the most oppressed layers of the working masses. Even a workers government that arises from a purely parliamentary combination, that is, one that is purely parliamentary in origin, can provide the occasion for a revival of the revolutionary workers movement. Obviously, the birth and continued existence of a genuine workers’ government, one that pursues revolutionary policies, must result in a bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie, and possible civil war. Even an attempt by the proletariat to form such a workers’ government will encounter from the outset the most determined resistance from the bourgeoisie. The slogan of the workers’ government thus had the potential of uniting the proletariat and unleashing the revolutionary struggle.” [Emphasis original]

Such a strategy would depend on an interaction between the mass movement in the work places and on the street where the mass movement pushes its representatives within government to implement an escalating series of radical demands which would in turn empower the mass movement. Demands which however moderate (or reasonable) they may seem in themselves will run up against the limits of that which capital will allow. It is from this process that institutions of workers democracy can emerge.

Could Syriza do this in Greece today if it wins the next election? Who knows? Not even Syriza leadership knows this I suspect. It certainly won’t happen unless Syriza is elected to office! In any case who on the left can guarantee that they would meet such a test if it came? Such a situation would be new territory for the European left.

Challenging capitalism in this way would not be easy, of course, but there again, there is no easy way of challenging capitalism. Such a government would be faced with a stark choice. It could either take radical measures to defend itself and its mandate (i.e. move sharply to the left and challenge the capitalist institutions) or collapse and accept the conditions demanded by the elites. There is a strong leftwing current inside Syriza that would oppose such a collapse and a mass movement on the streets that would back them up.

To defend such a government under these conditions would not only require a mass movement in Greece it would also require the development of solidarity action across Europe, to prevent the isolation of the Greek struggle. This implies the building of such parties across Europe to prepare for such a situation. Already the most radicalised

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sections of the European working class are looking to Syriza for a way forward. Syriza will not be able to provide this if it is left in isolation when the decisive battles break out.

This is where we should focus our discussion at the European and the international level.