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Greece

The historic responsibility of the left in Greece

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Sibylle Kaczorek and Jody Betzien, from the Australian Socialist Alliance, interviewed Yiannis Bournous in Athens on December 12 2012 for the journal *Links*. Yiannis is a leading activist in the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza), Greece's rapidly growing left party. He is also a member of the central political committee of Synaspismos, one of Syriza's affiliate groups, and a member of the executive board of the European Left party.

Syriza came close to winning elections in June 2012 on the basis of rejecting the brutal austerity being enforced on the people of Greece. Instead, a coalition of three parties (Greece's traditional conservative party New Democracy, its social-democratic rival PASOK and a right-wing split from Syriza, the Democratic Left) was formed, committed to greater austerity measures.

Q: In mid-October, Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras gave a radio interview and at the time he said that "the three party consortium that is collapsing, will collapse and then the country's future will be managed by healthy forces". How much closer is the coalition of collapsing?

A: Well, first of all, we are experiencing a long period in Greece in which you can never make safe predictions with specific timelines. By making this statement the leader of Syriza expressed the reflections that we get from society. That even the people who chose in June to support the pro-memorandum, the pro-bailout forces, are now clearly realising, in a step by step process, that the pre-electoral promises of New Democracy and the other two parties in the government, these promises are collapsing.

The coalition government voted in favour of the so called Third Memorandum of Understanding for Greece. They imposed a new set of super austerity measures, which has brought the minimum wage in the private sector to below 500 euros per month. They're destroying any capability of the existing welfare state and social services system in Greece to cover the basic needs of the citizens.

That's why we saw the emerging social mobilisations start heating up after September with the first general strikes. There is a strong willingness by an enlarging part of society to overthrow this super austerity policy.

That's why Syriza officially declared that we are fighting for the resignation of this government. We are doing so on two levels. The first is the parliamentary level, we are now the party of the major opposition and this means that on the one hand we are doing everything possible to block the reactionary super austerity measures and at the same time promote alternatives.

That's why for example Syriza has already proposed a new set of laws concerning the over indebted households and how to relieve the over indebted households from the big burden of the loans they have towards private banks. And we are doing the same for the over-indebted small and medium businesses, which are the backbone of the Greek economy traditionally. They have been collapsing since the first austerity program two years ago.

But on the other hand, we are also trying to raise the temperature on the social level, in the field of social struggles. From the first moment Syriza emerged as a possible candidate for government, we clearly stated that even if we win the elections and we manage to establish what we call a government of the left, an anti-Memorandum government, such a government even with a high vote, will not be able to win deeper changes in the Greek economy without strong popular support.

This means we are not seeking to reproduce the clientalist state of the political system that we have seen for the past 35 years since the fall of the dictatorship, but for a new relationship with society. This is a big question mark for us.

Q: Who are the healthy forces referred to?

A: I believe that from the two consecutive elections in May and June, all the political forces received a new political message.

The super-austerity programs that PASOK and New Democracy imposed through the three last cabinets deteriorated the social conditions for many social categories, social classes. And this led to a historical rupture of the bond between the two parties of the late bi-partisanship, New Democracy and PASOK; with the lower and middle classes of the Greek society that constructed what we call the swing vote.

The social forces that helped these two parties to acquire absolute majorities for the past 30 years, only exchanging places between government and major opposition.

So we are talking about a completely different political scenery at the moment.

The Greek social democratic model is collapsing. In the case of PASOK, they are now down to 5 or 6% in the opinion polls. And New Democracy, despite the fact that they won the elections, they won the elections with the lowest election result in history. This means the liberation of the social forces.

So, what we mean with our project for an alternative government, is a new connection with these liberated, emancipated social forces. Regardless of how they voted in the past.

Q: On many occasions, Syriza representatives have argued that leaving the eurozone will destroy the Greek economy. How do you respond to criticism from some of the left who argue that exiting the Euro is a more radical position to take?

A: The basic slogan of Syriza is "no more sacrifices for the Euro". What has been clearly demonstrated with the latest developments on the European level, is that there has never been a threat of a Greek exit â€” what they call a "GR exit".

This has been used as an argument for blackmailing the Greek electorate on the one hand, and on the other hand as an argument in order to convince the tax-payers of the other European countries that the contributions through the so-called support mechanism, which are actually contributions to rescue the thieves of the private banks, are used in order not to dismantle the eurozone.

At the same time, they told the Greek people through the mainstream media that the GR exit wouldn't be a problem for Germany or the rest of the eurozone, but would just cause destruction for the Greek society and economy. This has been a huge smear campaign and our response was that a left government would do anything possible in order to protect social interests.

When you are trying to answer to a wrong question, however right the answer you will find will seem to be, it will still answer to the wrong question. So there is no question of dismantling the eurozone, and there has never been such a question. There might have been some neoliberal fundamentalist Christian democrats from Bavaria or from Finlandor

the Netherlands who have been supporting this idea, but this has been marginal from the beginning and there has been no such real threat.

But the essence of the question and the so-called left criticism on our stance against a GR exit or the dissolution of the eurozone. The so-called left criticism, which supports the return to [former Greek currency] the Drachma is a fully Keynesian approach.

I will explain briefly why. The theory behind a so-called left position for exiting the euro is that, we will exit the euro, return to the national currency and then we can make some consecutive devaluation of the national currency. First point, this would lead to an even bigger destruction of salaries and pensions.

Then [the theory goes], we can be more competitive in the exports and then the big exporters who will profit from the exports, magically they will redistribute this wealth.

This is 100% pure Keynesianism, it has nothing to do with a radical stance concerning the question of the existence and the function of the eurozone and the economies, and actually it answers to the wrong question. It plays the game of the opponent by putting the currency as the major question.

What we want to change is not the currency, it is the social relations, and the balance of power that this currency represents.

That is why we are calling not only for a national struggle. We know that the national level is fundamental for the class struggle. But on the other hand, we recognise that even if we win in Greece and we establish a left government, if we don't see even gradual changes in the balance of power and the relations of forces, at least on the European level, then the left Greek government will remain as a "Village Gaulois" [ie: isolated].

It will be a historical rupture, because suddenly there will be a government to pose resistance to the neoliberal authoritarian project. But on the other hand, we have been calling for the formation of the European front of resistance. That's why for us the mobilisations across Europe on November 14 were very crucial. In my opinion, that was a historical breakthrough for the social movements in Europe.

I believe that the movement of the squares [occupy movement] created fertile ground for the development of a new kind of internationalism in social struggles. Even reformist trade unions are now mobilising in this direction. This, for us, is very crucial because without coordinated and massive European resistance you can achieve some initial things but you cannot proceed with deeper changes.

Q: Syriza has also been criticised from the left for calling to renegotiate Greece's debt rather than refusing to pay it. Can you explain the Syriza position?

The question of the debt, we believe, is in principle a political question and not a technical one. The debt has been used as the excuse for all the austerity programs. Greece had debt problems together with a lot of other European states for many years. Even Germany has a public debt that exceeds the criteria of the stability pact.

So we believe that with a political problem you have to give a political answer. What we have said from the start of the crisis is that this is not just a Greek issue. This is a European structural crisis of the way that the EU and the eurozone was constructed.

So we have been insisting that there cannot be a national solution to a European problem. That is why, what we have

proposed, together with the other forces of the European Left, is a European agreement on the public debt crisis that would include all the over indebted European states. It would follow the model that was agreed for Germany in 1953 after the World War II.

This includes two things; one is an abolition of a big part of the debt. We have been proposing an audit to see what kind of debt we have. What part of it comes from corruption or speculative interest rates in the past or things like that.

But at the same time, you need to protect some smaller investors, like households who have spent their lifetime savings to buy state bonds or social security funds who own state bonds. These were not protected in the so-called haircut of the Greek debt last year.

The first bond holders to be destroyed were small household bond holders, Greek social security funds. Greek Universities which almost went bankrupt because of the “haircut”. That is why we say that our program and our strategy is class orientated. You need to protect those who did not create the crisis and punish those who did.

At the same time, we are calling for an optimisation of the repayment condition of the remainder of the debt, again along the lines of the agreement for Germany in 1953. This means the precondition of growth. The years that our country appears with a positive growth rate we can repay. Those when we are in deep recession, like now the sixth consecutive year of recession, we cannot repay.

You don't have to be an economist to understand that. If you have recession and at the same time you have to repay interest and the capital on the loans and simultaneously find money for public investment to boost job creation; this is impossible. So we we need to make a choice. If you want Europe to be saved as a whole, you need to make choices. Our choice is to defend and promote those policies that could lead Europe out of recession; job creation, public investments, social control of strategic companies (banking sector, energy, transport etc) and at the same time secure basic social services etc.

But this is not enough, of course, because we acknowledge that the crisis is structural. We say that the European treaties that have been voted on have led the EU to the point that we are at now. You need radical change of the treaties and you need a fundamental change in the statutes of the European Central Bank, so that it becomes a last resort lender, which will offer direct loans to over indebted states, with a very low interest rate, as it does today with private banks.

The Party of the European Left made an official proposal for the creation of a European public bank for social and ecological development. This bank would directly fund with zero or very low interest rates only public investment directed to ecologically sustainable development and job creation projects.

Q: Tsipras was quoted as saying “Austerity has not failed because it was not implemented but precisely because austerity was enforced”. What is Syriza's alternative to austerity?

A: You know it is the first time in our history where we are forced by society itself to have very concrete alternatives for the “next morning”. This is a shift in the role of a left party in Greece.

This question is crucial. There is an urgency to find funds if we establish a left government. This means for example that one proposal would be to have an extra-ordinary tax, an immediate tax on big capital, big companies and the rich.

At the same time we need a very fast and efficient strategy for a change in the taxation system in Greece, a tax system which is actually against the Greek constitution. The constitution says that taxation in Greece should be progressive; each citizen must contribute according to his or her capabilities.

The historic responsibility of the left in Greece

Despite this, in a period where Greece is in the sixth year of recession, the annual taxation of the profits of big companies was cut by former PASOK PM George Papandreou. This has occurred at the same time as a cut in workers' wages and conditions.

I was reading an official analysis that said that in the last two years of recession the profitability of the 500 biggest Greek companies has increased by 19%. This demonstrates something that must change immediately.

So a basic target is to make the wealthy and not the poor pay, because lower and middle classes cannot contribute anything else. They have lost their houses, their jobs. In Athens you can find 25, 000 homeless people. The number of suicides because of personal devastation have been sky high. This demonstrated very clearly that we need to proceed with a radically different policy on how to acquire state revenues.

We need an agreement to tax the real estate fortune of the church, which is the biggest real estate owner in Greece. We need an agreement to tax the largest ship owners. They own the second largest commercial fleet in the world and they are officially tax evaders because of the 70-75 different tax exemptions that they enjoy because of the decisions of the previous governments.

If you do not proceed with class-orientated solutions you can never exit the tragic condition of the Greek economy today, because you cannot find any revenues.

Q: The fascist party Golden Dawn is currently polling around 13%. This has been compared to the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s. How does Syriza respond to this situation?

A: The rise of Golden Dawn is a complex phenomenon. It cannot be explained simply by stating that 500,000 Greek voters became fascists in one night.

Golden Dawn was projected as an anti-systemic radical solution. That is why, for example, many youngsters voted for them. The fertile ground for the flourishing of neo-fascist ideas was created first by the PASOK government and use of racist and xenophobic rhetoric in the mainstream political discourse.

People got used to xenophobic concepts through a "socialist" government. It would be very easy, if you combined the general crisis of political representation, and the rejection of what people see as the whole political system, to turn to solutions like this.

Golden Dawn is a complex network, they are "national socialists" concerning some aspects of the economy. They call for the nationalisation of the banks. But at the same time it is very contradictory. In their official statements in parliament, they have asked the government not to implement new taxes on the ship owners because they claim they are also "patriots who can help our homeland".

We know they have been working and enlarging their influence through gyms, football club "ultras" [organise supporters], among security guards in nightclubs and army special forces squads. They are also involved in criminal activity in this sense, not only through their murderous attacks.

So it is a complex network that is not simple to face and crush. They are also extremely hostile towards workers' struggles. For example, last year we had a very big strike of the steel workers at Halyvourgia.

Golden Dawn was against the strike but at some point they changed their position in Athens and took some food to the strikers but at the same time officially they were against the strike and in one factory they called on the strikers to go back to work.

Golden Dawn is a product of the capitalist crisis, but at the same time it presents itself as an anti-systemic force, although it is actually not.

What have we been doing? A complex problem requires a multi-dimensional strategy. It is not as simple as, for example, some anarchists might think to just create rival squads and have Nazi patrols and anti-Nazi patrols who crush each other every night.

What we have been trying to do is create broad anti-fascist committees in, for example, schools in collaboration with teachers unions or in neighbourhoods especially in Athens where the problem is bigger. And in neighbourhoods in collaboration with citizens of each neighbourhood who are artists, intellectuals we are trying to work through cultural events, trying to cultivate another kind of culture.

But you know another important thing is the networks of solidarity that we have been creating in neighbourhoods. These are not only crucial for the survival of the people, who are being assisted by these networks, but also for the introduction to a new kind of social organisation based on solidarity. Because Nazis are counting on fear, on the isolation of people, on the fear of criminality, on the fear coming from hunger and things like that.

What we are trying to promote is a collective way of facing social problems and this means that you are working together with your migrant neighbour. This is not philanthropy, this is not a vertical relationship, it is not a power game between the one who has and offers and the one who doesn't have anything depending on the other person above.

This is a horizontal kind of relationship. In our networks of solidarity, apart from the offers of free food and clothing, the relationship is based on the notion of exchange without the mediation of money.

Exchange of goods but also exchange of services. If your migrant neighbour has worked in the construction industry and is now unemployed, he can come and paint your house and at the same time you give him a tank of olive oil or offer free tutoring to his children.

These are also reflections that refer to more strategic questions. Because if you are talking about a vision of socialism with freedom and democracy, you need to promote the model of society that you want through opening small windows like that.

We do not wish to take the place of the state services. We clearly say this to the people that participate in the networks of solidarity, we are not replacing a public hospital by creating a local voluntary health care centre. We are helping each other to collectively survive, but at the same time we encourage people to collectively demand the satisfaction of their basic needs.

This is also a weapon against fascism, because it is a collective answer, an anti-racist, a cultural answer to the concept that Golden Dawn is using to reinforce itself.

Q: There have been accusations that the fascists have links to the police force, can you comment on that?

A: We have evidence, these are not just accusations. There have been repeated incidents, not only of tolerance of the riot police towards fascists in clashes with anti-fascists, but also in the demonstrations. There has been repeated evidence of police on motorbikes who have drawings on the back of their helmets with ancient Greek symbols used by the Nazis, or royalist symbols etc.

We have repeated incidents of racist violence within the police departments. There has been international exposure of these incidents through Amnesty International. In one case, when anti-fascist protestors clashed with Golden Dawn members, 15 of the anti-fascists were arrested and tortured. The Guardian published an article on this and the

use of tasers and other forms of humiliation tactics.

The response by the Minister for Citizens' Protection, as it is called, was to publicly state he will sue The Guardian for misinformation.

Another incident was in two areas of Greece, Golden Dawn members of parliament took part in attacks on migrant sellers in flea markets and destroyed their stalls and kicked them out. There has been evidence that in one of the two attacks, in the town of Messologi, police officers dressed as civilians were present in the squad of Golden Dawn members.

There has been an order for inquiries, but we are used to the endings of these kind of inquiries.

Also, there was a survey after the elections that showed that in specific polling stations in Athens close to central police departments, there was an estimation that around 50% of the policemen servicing in Athens voted in favour of Golden Dawn.

This is reinforced by the theory of the "two extremes" that is being dangerously used by all the parties of the government – unfortunately, even by the Democratic Left. It is this theoretical scheme of the two extremes, on the one hand Golden Dawn and on the other hand Syriza and everybody who demonstrates and resists.

The government not only uses this rhetoric, but has clearly taken a stance between the two extremes. The statements of the Minister for Citizens' Protection have been really provocative.

And the other danger is one that is often reproduced by left people. For example the general secretary of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), after the elections in June, stated in an interview that we should not be afraid of the Golden Dawn, because now that they are in parliament they will wear their suits and ties and they will become adapted to the system.

This is a tragic mistake. Because history has very bitterly proven that when institutions come in touch with fascism then institutions will adapt to fascism and not vice versa.

This argument we have been rejecting since the pre-electoral period. We said even if you don't agree with Syriza, even if you think we are completely against your interests, don't vote for Golden Dawn. This was clearly transmitted by our candidates and our leader. We were the only party that stressed this position.

Q: Based on a recent opinion poll, Syriza is in the leading party. When does Syriza anticipate new elections – will there be early elections?

A: We are returning to the first question in a way. We are not an oracle. Seriously, for us everything depends on the social availability and the organisation of the movements of resistance. If you have people actively present, pressuring the government, then we can have rapid political developments. In the absence of these mobilisation we will not have rapid developments and we will see these guys remain in power for longer.

I told you that officially we have said that our political aim right now is to force this government out, but this can come only through social pressure. Whenever it comes, we will be there to state that we are ready to take our historical responsibility.

Q: Around May next year, you will have the official founding congress of Syriza as a new unified, multi-tendency party. Is that Syriza preparing for elections?

A: Since the elections in June, the Syriza membership has been in a constant state of a pre-electoral period. To us, this means being part of the movement for resistance and not only organising electoral campaigns. It was the social pressures that kicked out two governments and imposed elections.

That is what we are trying to reinforce now. After thanking the 27% of the electorate for assigning such a huge responsibility to Syriza, the day after the elections in June, we clearly stated that in organisational terms Syriza was a party of 4%. We need to develop ourselves and evolve in such a way to be able to construct an open, inclusive, democratic, radical party of the left. Not only to embrace the 27% who already voted for us but also to enlarge this appeal.

This refers to the earlier mentioned new social alliances that are being supported in the last period. For us it is a very big bet, the question of whether or not we will be able to transform Syriza into a more coherent political subject.

We are experiencing a historical period where the model of parties of "ideological unity" have failed. This is even clearer after the last elections in Greece, when the monolithic dogmatism and sectarianism of the Communist Party lead to its political and electoral marginalisation.

We believe in the political unity and the unity of social needs. That is what we are trying to build.

The first signs in this preparational period are good. Syriza almost tripled its membership since the elections, we are now exceeding 30,000 and moving towards 40,000 members. This is not very big, but it is very important. It is the biggest membership that a left party, to the left of social democracy, has had in Greece for the last 20 years.

The qualitative analysis of the new members who join Syriza clearly demonstrate that there is an enlarging social availability to get in touch with the ideas of the plural and radical left. This is the basic aim for the next period. We are addressing people of all political origins. We believe that this is a historical period where we can meet people coming from the whole political spectrum on the basis of the protection of basic social needs. Of course, not including the extreme right.

Step by step, it gives us the optimism and strength to continue this unifying, transitional process of transforming Syriza in the next period until the founding congress.

We have similar positive signs in the elections of different sectorial trade unions, the forces of the unity lists of the left that we are trying to create have been advancing. This is very important for us, because one big aim for us is to convince the people that the traditional trade union model of the last decade "that included corruption, bureaucracy and conservatism" must change.

The only way to change is to reinforce the forces that have an alternative plan for what trade unionism means nowadays. How, for example, can it be inclusive of the precarious workforce, which is today huge in Greece but is not included in the trade unions?

The signs are positive and we believe that in this whole transitional period until the re-founding congress in late May or early June we will be able to enlarge this influence.

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