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What parties?

Where do socialists belong?

- Debate - Perspectives in Greece -

Publication date: Friday 18 September 2015

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IN "[Asking the Right Questions](#)," a thoughtful and thought-provoking essay for *Jacobin*, Catarina PrÃ-ncipe and Dan Russell argue that the strategy of building "mass workers parties" is the "only viable path toward an eventual rupture with not just austerity but capitalism itself."

Catarina and Dan have taken up important questions that arise for the left, based particularly on the experience in Greece, where radical left organizations participated in the formation of SYRIZA, the electoral coalition and then political party that came to power after elections earlier this year. As noted below, I agree with many of the points Catarina and Dan make in recounting the experience of the last eight months. But where their assertions about the left and "mass workers parties" become more generalized, I have questions and disagreements, which I want to lay out below in some detail.

The discussion about the left and broader party formations [is not a new discussion](#) . But writing in the wake of former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' capitulation to European Union enforced austerity, Catarina and Dan are right to challenge those who wish to write off the entire trajectory of the SYRIZA experiment in Greece as having been doomed from the start.

Instead, they champion the former Left Platform's fight within SYRIZA to pressure the Tsipras leadership to fulfill the anti-austerity pledges that had propelled the party to office in January and that motivated the Greek people's strong "No" vote in the July 5 referendum against austerity.

I agree with Catarina and Dan on this score, but the road from SYRIZA as a "mass workers party" to any potential "rupture" turned out to be anything but direct, since the Left Platform was ultimately defeated inside SYRIZA by the pro-Tsipras majority. In a tremendously important development, rather than capitulating to the capitulators, dozens of SYRIZA MPs and the Left Platform held firm to their politics and broke with the party leadership. They have launched the new formation Popular Unity as a radical left-wing alternative, along with left-wing groups outside of SYRIZA.

Tsipras' gamble that he could sell austerity while retaining sufficient popularity to dictate terms within SYRIZA has collapsed, along with his standing in the opinion polls. The battles to come in Greece will be fought on terrain chosen by its enemies, but workers will have a weapon that no other national working class has wielded in at least a generation: the component parts of a working-class party (Popular Unity remains a front and not a singular party) that not only defends a radical anti-austerity program, but has demonstrated its commitment to that program in practice.

Politically, while heterogeneous in theory and tradition, Popular Unity can count on a significant Marxist cadre, it is numerically significant, and it is deeply embedded in unions, campuses, community groups and social movements.

I second Catarina and Dan's estimation that Greek socialists such as Stathis Kouvelakis (and others such as the Internationalist Workers Left, known by its Greek initials DEA) accurately identified the strategic importance of joining SYRIZA and pushing for the idea of a government of the left that would reject and reverse austerity.

Popular Unity will run in Greece's elections on September 20 by referencing SYRIZA's former commitments to overturn the Memorandums and proposals for anti-austerity measures put forward by then-opposition leader Tsipras

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in the name of SYRIZA a year ago in Thessaloniki. The whole trajectory of the last eight months demonstrates the priority of joining that battle.

This strategy was not, however, universally accepted among revolutionaries, and I think Catarina and Dan are right to challenge certain critics in their essay – they single out only two authors, Tad Tietze and Paul Blackledge, but there are other forces who share this position.

The crux of the question is: Was Tsipras' betrayal inevitable and, if so, by joining the party, did the Greek revolutionary left inside SYRIZA set the stage for it to take place? Costas Lapavistas, a member of parliament elected for SYRIZA and now a founding member of Popular Unity, [argues in a Jacobin interview](#) that the battle needed to be fought out in real life. "Which way would Tsipras jump when the real class issues were put on the table?" he said. "Until the week after the referendum, the answer was still in the balance."

Revolutionaries inside SYRIZA provided the organized pressure to ensure that a struggle took place, culminating in the referendum showdown. As a result, millions of Greek workers now know, through their own experience, which political currents and leaders can be relied on to fight the battle against austerity to the end – and which cannot.

There is much more to the question of left strategy in Greece that is being discussed in [SocialistWorker.org](#) and elsewhere, but I want to examine the further implications in Catarina and Dan's article. Their conclusions about the potential strategic openings for revolutionaries working inside "mass workers parties" fit the SYRIZA case – or at least I believe they do once we drill down to the specifics – but what about their more general assertions?

To examine this question, I want to touch on several points they make in their article. (Throughout the article, I keep "mass workers parties" in quotations in order to refer to the specific sense in which Catarina and Dan use this phrase, but also to imply the question, which I do not attempt to answer here, of what exactly constitutes a "mass" party.)

First, as should be obvious from the case in Greece, if the left is to have any success in carrying out a strategy of participating in the building of "mass workers parties" – parties which include both revolutionaries and also strong, even dominant, reformist tendencies, as Catarina and Dan suggest – then the revolutionaries had better have a powerful enough voice and organization to prevent the more moderate elements from dictating party policy unilaterally.

Failing that, as in the case of SYRIZA, the left must at least be capable of making its own views publicly known and have sufficient organizational coherence to defend itself inside the broad party or lead a left-wing split at a place and time of its own choosing. Catarina and Dan may well assume this to be the case, but I think it must be spelled out more clearly.

Yet if we can agree that Popular Unity validates such a potential, Catarina and Dan fail to assess several examples in which the attempt to build (or enter) "mass workers parties" led to less happy outcomes – or at a minimum, outcomes that deserve more thorough study and consideration. Not all my examples below are European, but I think they ought to inform any discussion of revolutionaries' strategy in Europe.

Mexico: During and after Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' failed presidential campaigns to unseat the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1988 and 1994, the great majority of revolutionaries in Mexico, including the Trotskyist

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Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT)â€”whose presidential candidate won over 400,000 votes, or 1.9 percent in 1982â€”liquidated themselves into Cárdenas' Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). Today, [the PRD is a junior partner in enforcing neoliberalism in Mexico](#) .

The revolutionary left, shattered by the experience and faced with repression and violence as a consequence of the country's deep social crisis, [is struggling heroically to rebuild](#) .

Brazil: The Workers Party (PT), launched in 1980, represented the genuine aspirations of a truly radical working-class movement. Although revolutionaries exerted significant influence over the course of its development, after the party took power in 2002, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva expelled the revolutionary socialist senator Heloísa Helena from the party for her refusal to support austerity measures. Despite Helena's expulsion, a significant layer of former revolutionaries held firm to their governmental posts.

Helena and others launched the Party of Socialism and Liberation (PSOL) in 2004, which now opposes the PTâ€”as does the Trotskyist Unified Socialist Workers Party (PSTU), which formed in 1992 after several revolutionary currents were expelled from the PT. Today, the PT is presiding over a crippling recession and is mired in a grimy corruption scandal. [The far left has considerable clout](#) –far greater than, for instance, in the U.S.â€”but it remains a long ways from power.

Italy: During the mass protests in Genoa in July 2001â€”one of the signal moments of the anti-globalization movement of that timeâ€”the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC, a split from the old Stalinist Communist Party), especially its youth wing, mobilized tens of thousands of members. For several years before and after these events, revolutionaries of various stripes attempted to work within the PRC framework to rebuild the Italian social left and working-class movements. Yet in 2004, PRC deputies in parliament voted to authorize the Italian military's budget and fund its intervention in Afghanistan under NATO command.

After more than a decade of frustration, [elements of the revolutionary left are starting over](#). Meanwhile, the PRC itself has been reduced from 3.2 million votes and 35 deputies in parliament in 1996 to just 750,000 votes and no members of parliament in 2013.

There are other examples of broad formations that never really got off the ground in the sense of becoming "mass workers parties."

â€” The rise of RESPECT in Britain was brought back to earth with an acrimonious conflict involving its sole member of parliament, George Galloway, who was defeated in his re-election campaign in the May general election.

â€” The U.S. Green Party's potential trajectory as a "movement" party was cut short by September 11 and the retreat of many of its leaders wholly or partially back into the Democratic Party. It retains a harder, anti-Democratic Party core of activists today, but is much weaker than in 2000, when Ralph Nader won 2.7 percent of the vote for president.

â€” Even the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, [by far the most successful effort launched directly by revolutionaries](#), has

Catarina and Dan can rightly point to the more positive ongoing experience of Die Linke (Left Party) in Germany –[although it is not without its own difficulties->

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/european-union-refugee-crisis-germany/>">struggled to carve out a space for

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itself against the crowded field of left-of-center parties . And Catarina is a member of the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) in Portugal, which has combined [an emphasis on social mobilization and relatively successful electoral work](#) . However, in the current moment, if Podemos in Spain appeared to some to be on the fast track to power, [that trajectory has been complicated](#) by SYRIZA's retreat and the political ambiguity of Paulo Iglesias' strategy.

Meanwhile, today in Argentina, the revolutionary groups which constitute the [Left and Workers Front](#) , as well as those outside the Front – which together won over 900,000 votes in primary elections in August – have sharply diverging views about what sort of alliances are needed and with which forces.

Indeed, it is difficult to assess such a wide range of experiences. In all the instances named above, revolutionaries felt compelled to find a way to relate to some sort of significant political dynamic of struggle from below and sought to break out of their relative ideological and social isolation, while taking on a responsibility to lead. Some of these experiences have led to better outcomes (from a revolutionary point of view) than others, so it is not necessarily wrong to try.

My point is simply to say that the idea of building "mass workers parties" is a lot easier said than done, especially when the goal is not simply getting a party with a lot of members, but one which, as Catarina and Dan advocate, can lead toward a "rupture" with the system.

My second concern touches on Catarina and Dan's reading of socialist history and what they believe this implies for how revolutionaries should relate to "mass workers parties."

They argue that "the most relevant lesson from pre-war [First World War] social democracy for the class struggle today is that we must first build parties that will become dominant in the workers movement through the fight for reforms."

Unfortunately, they continue, "some revolutionaries have made...building small revolutionary groups...into a virtue by misinterpreting the experience of social democracy in general and the Bolsheviks in particular." What we ought to recognize, instead, is that the "Bolsheviks were not attempting to build a special 'revolutionary' party but a social-democratic one," they write.

I take a different view. I believe that Catarina and Dan are reading the Bolsheviks wrong because they counterpose "revolutionary" to "social democratic" in the context of pre-First World War Russia. Put another way, I suspect that Lenin would have been surprised to learn that he was building a party focused solely on the "fight for reforms." There's a longer discussion to be had here about exactly how and when the Bolshevik faction became the Bolshevik party, but that's not important for this particular discussion.

[Historian Lars Lih does contend](#) – and Catarina and Dan are clearly informed by his analysis – that Lenin really did not make any innovations in political or organizational party forms distinguishable from the German SPD until after 1917. But whether one accepts Lih's contention or not – for the record, I do not – that is a long ways from claiming that Lenin simply aimed to build the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party though a narrow focus on the "fight for reforms." What matters here is that Lenin insisted, at every stage, on several practices for socialists which I believe are, in fact, "the most relevant" lesson for us today.

Put in brief terms, Lenin sought to combine the following:

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- 1) A tenacious fight (some would go so far as to say ruthless) for a Marxist approach to all political and theoretical questions, as explained and publicized in party programs and publications;
- 2) An unyielding insistence that those who adopted this program and these views must build a disciplined and democratic organization – be it a self-organized faction or independent party; and
- 3) A creative spirit of engagement with new developments and struggles in a variety of settings – splits, fusions, trade unions, student revolts, mass strikes, nationalist rebellions by oppressed nationalities, soviets, Duma elections, etc.

At the heart of all this was the belief that the working class could and would rebel against capitalism and that the job of revolutionaries was to build a political organization designed to make that struggle more sophisticated, better organized and crystal clear on the need to overturn social relations and the states that enforced those relations. How exactly we accomplish this today and the order of the steps to be taken is a question that must be answered in practice, based on specific national contexts.

My third bone of contention with Catarina and Dan is when they argue that revolutionaries must orient to building "mass workers parties" because these projects are the "only way to keep the far left relevant to ordinary people." I entirely agree that building some sort of broad party may well be a critical initiative for revolutionaries. However, it is obviously not the "only way" the far left can fight to win influence and a base.

Here's a short list of other ways revolutionaries may organize effectively: leading a strike; fighting against public school closures as a teacher, parent or student; organizing protests against police brutality; mobilizing against anti-immigrant or fascist bigots in the streets; building a union; publishing books, newspapers and magazines; hosting public meetings, study groups and conferences.

If these efforts can be done under the umbrella of a "mass workers party," so much the better. But historically speaking, it is very often the case that such initiatives came before any sort of larger-scale "mass workers party" unity was possible.

Consider these concrete examples: In Britain, the Socialist Workers Party's launching of the Anti-Nazi League against the rise of the far right in the 1970s and after; in the U.S., the International Socialist Organization's efforts to campaign against the racist death penalty, begun in the mid-1990s; and in Brazil, the PSTU's long-running work to build struggle-oriented union coalitions. Meanwhile, in the 2000s, various individuals connected to the Fourth International – some of them from countries where they were involved in broad left projects, and others not – played a central role in launching the World Social Forum movement.

These are some examples among many that could be cited. They are different in scale and scope, but the point is that left organizations, guided by their understanding of united front methods, were able to initiate these activities without necessarily touching on the question of "mass workers parties." The successes and difficulties of the initiatives are open to debate, but it has to at least be said that these were concrete ways of being "relevant" to at least some "ordinary people" who have a lot at stake in those struggles.

Fourth, in concluding their essay, Catarina and Dan offer three strategic ideas for further consideration.

They argue rightly, as I see it, that "broad left parties don't emerge out of thin air, or because of the goodwill of small radical or revolutionary groups: they are the product of shifts born of broader political mobilizations that existing parties were unable to tap into."

To my reading, this insight ought to actually temper their insistence on the broad party form being necessarily the main strategic focus for the left. But they are right to emphasize that this means any attempt to fill such a void must be done with eyes wide open and a sense of both the political trajectories of, and the balance of forces within, the various reformist and revolutionary elements involved.

Next, they content that the old social-democratic parties' acceptance of neoliberalism has led to their "Pasokification" – a reference to the near-total collapse of Greece's Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK by its Greek initials). Prior to 2012, PASOK regularly captured around 40 percent of the vote in national elections and dominated the country's trade union federations. However, PASOK's decision to enforce Troika-directed austerity in Greece shattered the party's base, reducing it to under 5 percent of the vote in January 2015. This debacle set the stage for the rise of SYRIZA, with its previous commitment to reversing the austerity agenda.

Although under very different circumstances, the British Labour Party, which in the previous election won over two-thirds of the 59 seats in parliament from Scotland, lost all but one of those seats in elections earlier this year, with the Scottish National Party jumping from six to 56 seats in 2015.

Catarina and Dan are right to point to the potential "Pasokification" of social-democratic parties, but again, I would caution against overgeneralization. The resurgence of interest in the Labour Party based on left-winger Jeremy Corbyn's campaign; Jean-Luc Mélenchon's split to the left of the French Socialists and his alliance with the Communist Party; whispers of an alliance between the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and Podemos; even Bernie Sanders' run inside the Democratic Party – all remind us that powerful currents of self-preservation survive within the "old" parties.

Sometimes the left can take advantage of these developments, but just as often, the worst neoliberal social-democratic – or even liberal-bourgeois, Peronist, nationalist or other – party can undergo a facelift, voluntarily or otherwise, and win back part of its base.

I want to focus on one other disagreement I have with Catarina and Dan's article: their approach to the capitalist state. They argue that the new "mass workers parties" ought to aim at taking "state power" on the understanding that if "what socialists can accomplish using the capitalist state is limited, it does have relative autonomy from business...Not recognizing this possibility means giving up hope and denigrating all reforms short of revolution."

Purely as a matter of clarity, from a Marxist (and certainly Leninist) point of view, it is better to say that a "mass party" like SYRIZA can win an election, form a government and assume office (uncomfortably and temporarily) within the apparatus of a capitalist state – but this doesn't amount to taking "state power."

This may seem pedantic, but when Catarina and Dan speak of the need for "campaigns to achieve state power and implement progressive policies," I think they are sliding over an enormously important point of theory and politics without so much as a comment. They simply ignore the long-running debate among revolutionaries about whether

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the capitalist state can be reformed or must be overturnedâ€”"smashed," [as Marx and Lenin liked to say](#) â€”and replaced with a system of democratically run workers councils.

The more immediate question is this: Can we say that SYRIZA really assumed "state power?" Haven't the last eight months gone to show that Tsipras, as long as he accepted the rules of the Greek state and the broader European state apparatus, was not really in power at all? In Athens today, what is striking is that the only "relative autonomy" the capitalist state seems to enjoy is its autonomy from the democratic will of the working class. Didn't Tsipras' betrayal of the July 5 referendum demonstrate that?

If Catarina and Dan agree with that point, then I want to ask them about their formulation of the question. Why should stressing, as I think we ought to do, the extremely tight bonds between the capitalist state and the bourgeoisieâ€”as opposed to sections of the state apparatus enjoying relative autonomy from this or that section of private capitalâ€”prevent revolutionaries from fighting for concessions from an enemy class and the state mechanisms and organisms by which it guarantees its rule?

Far from "denigrating" the strategy of mobilizing workers and the oppressed to demand rights and concessions from a capitalist state, the dialectic of reform and revolution, as classically advanced by Rosa Luxemburg, remains central to understanding any confrontation with capitalism. Radical parties may, under certain conditions, even win a majority in parliament based on a commitment to break with austerity, but this then forces a showdown in the streets, factories, schools and hospitals. In any case, this ought not be seen as a "typical pattern," but [a question of potential, and not necessary, strategy](#) .

So where does that leave us? I believe that Catarina and Dan are absolutely right to criticize any rigid rejection of revolutionaries initiating or joining projects which bring different currents of the left together in attempts to challenge neoliberalism and social democracy from the left. We agree that a dual focusâ€”on class struggle and social mobilization on the one hand, and electoral contests on the otherâ€”can and ought to be mutually reinforcing. And we agree that creating "mass workers parties," or even relatively large organizations, which can begin to cross over from criticism to social force, offer certain strategic advantages.

But I think these points of agreement co-exist with a disagreement that building "mass workers parties" is the "only viable path toward an eventual rupture with not just austerity but capitalism itself." When examining all the different national contexts in which such a strategy would have to be applied, I think the circumstances simply don't exist in each one for initiating or joining such efforts.

Moreover, I don't believe efforts of the left that don't involve relating to or launching a broad left party formation in some form are doomed to irrelevance. And I think Catarina and Dan's analysis doesn't give sufficient thought to another aspect of the organization project of the revolutionary leftâ€”how to train, sustain and organizationally knit together succeeding generations of people drawn to revolutionary politics. In short, there is no need to counterpose recruiting members to a socialist project in the ones and twos with thinking about when it makes sense to launch larger initiativesâ€”in fact, in today's world, I believe the two must be closely linked.

If we agree on the need to learn from the most successful examples of these new projects, Popular Unity in Greece chief among these, then I hope this exchange has clarified where we differ, even if sharplyâ€”not in order to settle academic disputes, but in the interest of comradely debate, mutual respect and international solidarity.

September 17, 2015

[Socialist Worker](#)