

SYRIZA and the Rise of Radical Left-Reformism in Europe

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The rise of SYRIZA, Greece's Coalition of the Radical Left, in the May elections and in polls since, has electrified the left globally.

The election on 6 May revealed that the mass of the Greek people rejected the austerity programme imposed under the Memorandum of Understanding between their government and the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). SYRIZA's leader, Alex Tsipras, has denounced the programme as 'barbarous' and his refusal to form a coalition with the parties that support the Memorandum has forced Greece into a second election on 17 June.

The last opinion poll published on Friday 1 June showed SYRIZA on 31.5 percent, its highest performance yet, and a full six points ahead of the right-wing New Democracy on 25.5 percent¹. This puts SYRIZA on track to be the largest party after the June 17 election, with over 100 parliamentary seats and in a position to form a government.

The stakes are very high. If SYRIZA forms a government that rejects the Memorandum, the European Central Bank might well react by ceasing to fund the Greek banks, precipitating Greece's full default on its foreign debts and departure from the eurozone.

The prospect of a radical left-reformist government in Greece posing a radical al-

ternative to austerity and the crisis of capitalism has provoked panic among the Euro-elites and the Greek ruling class. Tsipras stunned Europe's rulers when, after receiving the mandate from the Greek president to try and form a government, after New Democracy proved unable to do so, he declared the austerity measures being imposed on Greece 'null and void'.

The campaign of Jean-Luc Melenchon in the French Presidential election shows that the re-emergence of a left-reformist current in politics isn't peculiar to Greece, as the EU ruling class strategy of deepening austerity erodes traditional political loyalties and creates rising political polarisation. Overall unemployment across the eurozone stands at its highest level since 1999 when the currency was launched with 17.4 million out of work². The scale of economic contraction and suffering in some of Europe's southern edge echoes the 'shock therapy' Eastern European countries were subject to in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, but it has largely been without precedent in Western Europe since the Second World War.

In Ireland the growth of support for Sinn Fein and 'Independents' suggests that a similar space for an anti-austerity left reformist party may also exist here. Recent opinion polls put Sinn Fein at 25 percent and 'Independents' (including the left) at 17 percent, ahead of The Labour Party at

¹The *Public Issue/Kathimerini* poll, published on Friday 1 June. Opinion polls are banned during the last three weeks of campaigning in Greece.

²http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

³<http://politicalreform.ie/2012/05/14/fine-gael-labour-coalition-unable-to-command-enough-seats-for-a-dail-majority-sunday-business-post-red-c-poll-13th-may-2012/#more-3399>

10 percent³. (Though neither the degree of radicalisation nor the level of mobilisation of the working class is as yet comparable to that in Greece.)

The radicalisation generated by the crisis, and resistance to it, is causing working people to break from their traditional loyalty to mainstream social democrats, built up in some cases over decades. But when they do so they are more likely to turn first to other more radical versions of reformism, where these seem credible and articulate an alternative in the language the social democrats used to deploy, rather than moving directly to the revolutionary left. Change within the framework of the system still seems easier and more plausible to many, than the message of revolutionaries that to solve the crisis workers need to rely on their own resistance and ultimately take control of society into their own hands.

The example of SYRIZA suggests that this space can be filled by coalitions of revolutionaries and left reformists. If revolutionaries move quickly and avoid sectarianism they can help create a new left by forming broad alliances or class struggle parties so as to better engage with radicalising workers.

Where the far left fails to do this new political formations can fill the vacuum. In France the Left Front formed out of a left split from the French Socialist (Labour) Party uniting with the French Communist Party. This overtook the far-left New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) as the main expression of resistance to the crisis, partly due to the NPA's failure to broaden out to fill the space to the left of the Socialist Party.

Both these examples show that a perspective of building 'new left' alliances alongside the revolutionary party is necessary for revolutionaries in Europe today. Recent elections also show that far from

reformism being dead, left-reformist parties have benefited from the crisis rather than the anti-capitalist, revolutionary left where they stand alone.

The elections point to deepening class polarisation across Europe. Major battles lie ahead that can in turn push the process of radicalisation further left, especially where the solutions offered by the various versions of reform rather than revolution are put to the test.

Who are SYRIZA?

SYRIZA, the 'Coalition of the Radical Left', has its origins in a split in the Greek Communist Party in 1968 between those who remained aligned with the Soviet Union and the Eurocommunists who were detaching themselves from it, largely on a social democratic basis. In the 1980s both sides came together again to form Synaspismos, 'the coalition of the left and progress'. But in 1989, following financial scandals under a Pasok (Labour) government, they cooperated with New Democracy in a national unity coalition government.

After a few months they joined a second coalition government including both New Democracy and discredited Pasok. As a result the whole Communist Party Youth left Synaspismos and the Communist Party, later forming the New Left Current (NAR) which now participates in Antarsya, the coalition of the anti-capitalist left, alongside the Greek Socialist Workers Party (SEK).

The two wings of Synaspismos then split again, with the pro-USSR Communist Party separating and becoming the KKE of today and the pro-E U wing remaining as Synaspismos. In 1992 Synaspismos voted for the Maastricht Treaty. At the next elections Synaspismos's vote collapsed.

In the early 2000s Synaspismos was involved in the anti-globalisation movement and started to shift to the left. It changed its name to 'Coalition of the left, the movement and ecology'. Then in 2004 Synaspismos formed a broader coalition with a few other small organisations, called SYRIZA, the Coalition of the Radical Left.

Synaspismos is by far the biggest party in SYRIZA and dominates it politically. Inside SYRIZA there are ex-ministers from the 1989 second coalition government. At the same time you have people who have been involved in the movement for a long period and who are on the left, and you have politicians who say Greece has to be out of the euro to stop austerity. SYRIZA has both a left and a right but is led by left reformists who, unlike the Irish Labour Party, won't simply jump at the first chance of power even if it means abandoning all previous promises.

SYRIZA also has some influence in the trade unions, mainly in the public sector. The private sector unions are dominated by the Greek Communist Party though their refusal to work with others on the left is weakening their grip.

SYRIZA's breakthrough

The Greek elections in early May saw the combined support for the two main parties of austerity, PASOK and New Democracy, crumble from 77 percent just two and half years ago to 32 percent. PASOK lost nearly 2 million votes at the election and New Democracy lost 1 million - out of a population of just 11 million. The biggest beneficiary was the left. especially Syriza . The combined left vote was 27 percent, with Syriza gaining 17 percent, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) gaining 8 percent and the Front of the Greek Anti-Capitalist Left (ANTARSYA) 1.9 percent.

The first reason for the dramatic rad-

icalisation is the impoverishment and suffering imposed on the people. The rate of unemployment in Greece is now over 21 percent - it has doubled over the last two years. For young people unemployment is at 50 percent. There used to be hardly any homeless people in Athens but this winter there were 25,000 living on the streets. Wages and pensions have been cut by between 20 and 40 percent. There are also 400,000 workers who haven't been paid for five months in the private sector and there is a similar picture in the public sector. These are very big changes in a very short time and after all of this the national debt has actually grown! People see the austerity policies aren't working and this has created huge bitterness and anger.

The second reason is that people have fought back. Greece has had 17 general strikes in two years - one every six weeks on average! Two of these were for 48 hours. And for every general strike there were tens, and sometimes hundreds, of strikes and occupations that were happening from below and putting pressure on the union leadership to call the general strikes.

There was also the movement of the 'indignados' connected with the strikes. For a month there were people in the squares, and not just in the big squares, but in the suburbs with hundreds of people meeting and discussing every week about how to take the movement forward.

The rise in support for SYRIZA is very recent. As people broke from PASOK and moved to the left, the first thing they looked to was the Democratic Left which is a right wing split from SYRIZA. It's leader, Fotis Kouvelis, had left SYRIZA saying he wanted to cooperate with PASOK in government at some point in the future. A month before the elections, the Democratic Left was getting about 15 to 17 percent in the polls and the media, PASOK and New Democracy were all saying

that the Democratic Left will join them in a new coalition government.

But this was very bad for the Democratic Left. People didn't want them to cooperate with PASOK and New Democracy. So people started moving on from the Democratic Left further to the left, which shows how rapidly new political formations can arise during a crisis.

SYRIZA's election platform offered a radical programme, it included:

- A moratorium on debt payments.
- Taxing the rich and a radical redistribution of income and wealth.
- The nationalisation/socialization of the banks and their integration into a public banking system under social and worker's control. The nationalisation of all public enterprises of strategic importance.
- The administration of public enterprises based on transparency, social control and democratic planning.
- The ecological transformation of the developmental model including energy, manufacturing, tourism and agriculture.
- Well-paid, well-regulated and insured employment, the restoration of the minimum wage and collective agreements, opposition to layoffs, universal unemployment benefit and the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income.
- A guaranteed minimum income or unemployment benefit, medical care, housing and access to all services of public utilities.
- Price controls and price reductions.
- The introduction of direct democracy and institutions of self-management under worker's and social control.
- Improved of the rights of women and young people in the family, the work place and in public administration.
- The social inclusion of immigrants and equal rights protection.
- Restoration of the pensions and the universal system of social insurance.
- A free health service and universal, public and free education.
- End to tax avoidance and tax havens.
- Disengagement from NATO and shutdown of the foreign military bases.

The manifesto concluded with a declaration that the current economic and social system has failed and must be overthrown. It goes on: 'We are calling for a new model of production and distribution of wealth, one that would include society in its totality. Our strategic aim is socialism with democracy, a system in which all will be entitled to participate in the decision-making process.'

If elected can Syriza implement this programme for government?

Implementing such a program would alleviate greatly the burden of the crisis on workers but it would mean a radical break with capitalism that could only be achieved by massive class struggle. It would require radical action and organisation of workers outside of parliamentary politics.

Socialists therefore welcome the possibility of SYRIZA forming a left government and trying to implement its program. However there is an ambiguity in SYRIZA's approach to implementing its program. Some in the coalition believe it requires radical action by workers, others in the majority Synaspismos believe a better deal can be negotiated with the EU.

For the latter SYRIZA's programme is premised on the idea that the Euro-elite are more scared of losing the euro as a tool in global capitalist competition than they are of the contagion of resistance spreading through the Eurozone. Hence they believe they will cut a deal with a new Greek government.

SYRIZA do not call for exit from the euro but say that they will make no sacrifice for the euro. They then advance a series of demands, which are incompatible with membership of the eurozone. This puts the ball in the court of the EU elites. If they want Greece outside of the euro they have to expel it from the euro.

This position on the euro is designed to deal with a contradictory desire amongst the Greek population. Whilst a big majority are against austerity they are also in favour of staying within the eurozone - which are mutually incompatible aspirations. The EU 'bailout' programs to maintain the euro are the mechanism by which austerity is being imposed.

This approach needs to be strongly upfront in the election campaign if the electorate is to be armed against the threats and ultimatums it will face. However the ambiguity can also be used as a fudge to avoid focusing on the need to build independent radical movements of workers in opposition to the state by claiming a new deal at EU level is possible.

One leading Syriza advisor put it:

⁴<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/643.php>

I would like to underline the fact that SYRIZA's proposal is not to renegotiate the so-called bailout agreement but rather is a complete rejection of it.

A key precondition for the success of this strategy is that in case of failure the people will be informed and mobilized and presumably ready to confront, through solidarity networks, the hardships that will follow the default⁴.

However there is little evidence SYRIZA is informing and mobilising workers for such an eventuality. In fact the majority of SYRIZA's leadership are holding out that a restructuring of the EU is a possibility. They argue that the EU has been captured by the neoliberals. The solution is to change this. So they say, 'look what's happened in France - we have a powerful new ally in Francois Hollande who will argue for economic growth'. Tsipras has also called for negotiations to reform the euro and the EU.

SYRIZA's leaders say that they won't act unilaterally to cancel the debt. They want a moratorium so that Greece can stop paying the debt for three, or maybe five years, to allow growth, and then they can renegotiate the debt. But the problem is that will mean negotiating a new memorandum. As a step in that direction they seek a budget with a surplus because they claim that this would strengthen the negotiating position of Greece with its creditors. In effect this is a postponement of the promise to end austerity until the German government and the banks agree to it.

In such a situation the revolutionary left is right to be enthusiastic about the possibility of a left government in Greece that can shift some of the burden of the

crisis onto the elites. But they are also correct to highlight the potential pitfalls and traps in such a government.

A left government must support radical action by workers and promote transferring more power into the hands of the working class if it is not to become a tool of the ruling class in maintaining its rule.

However there are many danger signs. *BBC Newsnight* economics editor, Paul Mason, reports 'When I spoke to leading members of SYRIZA in summer 2011, they said the most obvious solution would be an above-politics left-nationalist figure, a 'Greek Kirchner' or 'Greek Morales', and that the absence of such a figure would make it impossible to form what Marxists refer to as a 'workers government' - ie a radical reforming government with the participation of the far left, but limited to parliamentary means'.

Paul Mason continued, 'When I interviewed a SYRIZA spokesman earlier this year [2012] I explored the problem of a far-left party, which is anti-Nato etc, taking power in a country whose riot police have been regularly clashing with that party's youth since 2008. The message was that they would be purposefully limited in aim, and that the core of any programme would be a debtor-led partial default'⁵.

The debate on a 'workers government'

Some on the left are going as far as saying Syriza could form a 'workers government' - a government that will be an initial step towards full workers power.

Under certain circumstances a radical left government can sharpen the class struggle and inspire greater resistance from workers. This was the case initially with the Popular Front government in France in

1936 that inspired further militancy which won the 40 hour week, paid holidays and collective bargaining.

Left governments can inspire workers, but they can also sow illusions in the old state and parliaments as ways to get change. In France the Communist Party used its influence to demobilise the working class and in four years France was under Nazi occupation.

In Spain the Popular Front government of 1936 was met with Franco's fascist coup. This in turn provoked a revolutionary upsurge in Barcelona and elsewhere which resulted in virtual dual power. However the Stalinists, the reformists and even the anarchists used loyalty to the Popular Front to hold back working class struggle to within the limits of capitalism and this enabled the fascists with the aid of Hitler and Mussolini, to crush the Republic and impose their dictatorship for nearly forty years.

In other words the election of a left government marks a huge step forward for the movement, one that revolutionary socialists must support and welcome, but precisely because it throws down the gauntlet to the ruling class it can also be a moment of great danger.

Marxists are revolutionaries not because we prefer revolution to reform but because we understand that the crisis of capitalism leads to moments when either revolution succeeds or there is terrible reaction.

Workers need to understand that it is their own power from below that is key to changing the world not parliaments and left governments. Where leaders maintain the illusion that change can come through the capitalist state and parliament it demobilises workers and allows the ruling class to re-establish its power through brutal means. This was the case

⁵<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18056677>

with Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile in 1970-73 that was crushed by the Pinochet coup.

The state is not neutral; it is a weapon of class rule which, as Marx pointed out after the Paris Commune and Lenin reemphasised in *The State and Revolution*, 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of and use for its own purposes'. Instead workers need to smash the capitalist state and replace it with their own democratic workers state. If this is not done the state will undermine the left government and tame it or try to destroy it. In Greece

where 50 percent of the police voted for the openly fascist Golden Dawn, and which suffered military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974 this is no abstract threat.

The leadership of SYRIZA has shown it has some mettle in standing up to the onslaught from the European and Greek elites. How far it will go in leading workers resistance is an open question. But whatever the answer to that question it is necessary to combine support for SYRIZA against the right with the building of a revolutionary party willing to go all the way to workers' power.