

# Socialists and Left Government

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After six years of recession, five under the tutelage of the hated 'troika' (the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF), Greece's future in the euro is again in question. Alexis Tsipras, Syriza's fiery young leader, promises a panoply of feel-good policies, including tax cuts and a public-sector hiring spree, and a slashing of Greece's debt load, which stands at over 170 percent<sup>1</sup> of GDP. But such pledges seem at odds with those made by Greek governments in exchange for the bailouts that have kept Greece in the single currency. Greek bond yields have spiked, and there are worrying signs of deposit outflows from banks.

- *The Economist*.<sup>1</sup>



Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras on an election poster with the slogan 'Hope is Coming'

'Hope is coming' read the banners in Athens at Syriza rallies in the days before

the recent election. On the crest of a massive wave of working class expectations the Greek radical left alliance, 'Syriza', took 149 seats in the Greek parliament. For the first time in more than 40 years, power will be neither with the Tory-style New Democracy Party nor the labourite PASOK, the two parties that had dominated Greek politics since the fall of a military junta in 1974, both beaten by a party that has until recently been on the fringe. To the joy and celebration of the international left was soon added confusion, as Syriza announced a coalition Government with the racist Independent Greeks. People tried to make sense of a coalition between a radical left that inspires so much hope and a nasty UKIP-style racist party that opposes immigration and gay rights, is pro-public order and whose leader Kammenos is a former Minister of Defence with links to the higher ranks of the Army.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that the logic of parliamentary politics is a reformist politics that sees Cabinet as the place where changes are made, drawing movements into compromises, undermining the mobilising capacity of the working class and leading to the defeat of Left Governments and the wider working class movement. From this limited parliamentary point of view, demonstrating to the State machine that there are limits to your radicalism makes sense, but from a more radical point of view, encouraging the fight to develop further into a fight for socialism, spreading illusions in reforming the State can be fatal.

The first manner in which workers imagine an alternative to capitalist govern-

<sup>1</sup><http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21639524-populist-election-win-need-not-spell-disaster-greeceor-euro-zone-era-syriza>

ments or even a 'socialist' government will often be through the prism of parliament. The positive side of the growth of these radical left movements is that they represent for workers a rejection of austerity and workers' growing self-confidence. We have to start from an immense excitement about the rise of the radical left movements, like Podemos and Syriza, not excitement about the leaders such as Alex Tsipras, but excitement in seeing this shift as a reflection of the militancy of workers in Greece and Spain. We can also see in the desire for a 'left government' an initial and vague rejection of capitalism on the part of masses of workers. The growth of an 'authentic' Social Democratic or left reformist consciousness amongst hundreds of thousands of workers is a vital stepping stone to a revolutionary consciousness. Revolutionaries have to position themselves to engage with these masses of leftward-moving workers, learn to express themselves in language the workers understand, while at the same time learning how to translate our ultimate revolutionary objectives into present day tactics.

But there are contradictions in these formations with the leading figures moving to more traditional Labour Party style politics as they get closer to power. Key demands like cancellation of the debt are jettisoned. These political formations may appeal to the confidence of workers but also at the same time to the doubts of workers. They appeal to the desire to change things but they do so within the limits of the existing capitalist economy. Capitalists today cannot afford the reforms that they could during the post war boom, which lasted from the 1940s to 1973, and so any left government will very quickly have to decide whether or not to fight or capitulate as the ruling class can use their economic might, control of the banks and

also the media to strangle the left or to force a capitulation which demoralises the working class support base of the Government. The capitalists also control the police, army command, courts and unelected state machinery which they can use to declare a left government 'unconstitutional', or, at times of crisis, to overthrow by force.

Before returning to the question of tactics for socialists let's look at some examples of previous left governments. The debate about to what extent socialists can utilise parliament has been a dividing line in the socialist movement for more than a century. From the participation of French socialist Millerand in a cabinet with General Galliffet (who ordered the mass murder of workers after the 1871 Paris Commune!) right up to the electoral successes of the radical left in present day Europe, a crucial question is the nature of the state and the extent, if any, to which it can be used by the working class movement.

## **The Provisional Government Russia 1917**

'We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of the coming revolution' said Lenin in January 1917<sup>2</sup>, yet radical exiles like Lenin were soon to be free to travel back to Russia after the rising of February 1917. The Tsar abdicated on March 3rd. In his place was formed a Provisional Government which initially consisted of members of the capitalist parties and was led by Prince Lvov. Even the 'Council of the United Nobility' rallied to the Provisional Government as they understood that to turn back the tide of revolution would necessitate wearing a democratic mask. The government gave an amnesty to all those who had participated in previous rebellions and terror attacks,

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<sup>2</sup>See Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 23 Moscow 1964

abolished class restrictions and hereditary titles and declared freedom of the press. It seemed Russia was free.

The Provisional Government from the start had to share power with the worker's mass assemblies or 'Soviets'. The uneasy tension or 'Dual Power' situation couldn't last forever as a class society can't tolerate two sets of political masters. The next few months would be a struggle between the Provisional Government and the worker's assemblies, with a battle taking place within the worker's councils themselves, between those who wanted to render the Soviets subordinate to the Provisional Government and those, like Lenin and the revolutionary Bolsheviks, who wanted power transferred to the workers' councils.

The provisional government of landowners and capitalists started with one socialist on board, the lawyer Kerensky, but as the class struggle continued to escalate they brought in more. On May 5th agreement was reached and 6 socialist ministers joined the cabinet.

When a right-wing General, Kornilov, brought cannons onto the streets, the ensuing protest movement saw the government appoint a socialist Minister of Labour, a Menshevik Minister of Posts. But this participation by socialists in the provisional government didn't change the class aims of the government; to maintain private property, to continue the war and to re-establish discipline in the armed forces.

The Bolsheviks joined the protests under the banner: 'Down with the ten capitalist Ministers'. Lenin had returned from exile and won the Bolsheviks to the idea of power going to the workers' councils, the Soviets. He himself realised that although ultimately the revolution could only win with a transfer of power to the workers' councils, the majority of workers were not convinced of that yet and so the slogan,

'All power to the soviets', was a bit premature.. It was necessary to adopt slogans that put pressure on the provisional government to adopt a more left-wing stance but the Bolsheviks had no illusions in the government but did this to cut the umbilical cord connecting the masses to the compromisers in the soviets and in the provisional government.

By the summer the regime was falling apart with economic collapse encouraged by the bosses.. There was a growing peasant revolt outside the cities. Lenin called for the profits of the millionaires to be published and for the arrest of fifty to one hundred of them. Although at the soviet congress only one in seven delegates was a Bolshevik, on the streets the masses were 'thick with Bolsheviks'. At the end of June the machine gun regiment and a significant minority of workers were sick of the compromisers leading the soviets and called for an assault on the Provisional Government. A minority of the most militant workers and soldiers already wanted a second revolution. The Bolsheviks knew that a premature insurrection could wreck the whole revolution. The government could deal with a minority uprising and drown it in blood. They almost got their opportunity in July 1917. The question was how to avoid walking into a trap.

By July the tensions were mounting and the machine gun regiment would wait no longer and went into the streets. The rank and file Bolsheviks went with the masses. Crowds of thousands gathered at the Bolshevik HQ where Lenin and others tried to pour cold water on the more extreme demands from the crowds. 80,000 workers from the massive Putilov works marched to the HQ for answers. The next day on July 4th the Bolshevik military committee joined the protests to protect them from the counter revolution. Government troops fired on the protests to pro-

voke workers and soldiers. A worker held one of the Mensheviks up against a wall and shouted 'take power when it's given to you, you bastard!' But the compromisers that led the soviets had no intention of removing the Provisional Government. The workers had marched under the slogan 'All power to the soviets' and yet those same soviets didn't want the power. Workers left demoralised and confused. 500,000 had taken to the streets armed and if given the order they certainly could have temporarily seized power in St Petersburg but they would not have held it very long.

The Provisional Government smashed up the Bolshevik HQ and locked up the machine gun regiment. Trotsky was thrown into jail and Lenin went into hiding. Power was handed over to Kerensky. He wanted to balance between the conflicting classes like Napoleon. Right-wing General Kornilov wanted to play the same role and was busy organising for a coup. He wanted to 'hang every single soviet delegate from the end of a rope'. Kerensky was worried that Kornilov might do away with him as well and began to panic. He dismissed the General. News came in that Kornilov was marching on St Petersburg with his 'savage division'. The Mensheviks were terrified and needed a connection with the masses in order to mobilise the defence of the city. The Bolsheviks were quick to jump to the call to defend the city. The 'united front' with the Mensheviks not only strengthened the Bolsheviks and won over masses of workers to their party but also exposed the weakness of the compromisers and the provisional government. As Trotsky explained 'we rest our guns on Kerensky's shoulder to take aim at Kornilov and then we will deal with Kerensky'. Kornilov's coup evaporated. The workers now saw the slander against the Bolsheviks in July as preparation for the August coup. The working class swung

over to Lenin's party. In the St Petersburg soviet the workers elected 519 Bolsheviks to 414 compromisers, a majority. By working with the Mensheviks the Bolsheviks had exposed them and destroyed their hold over the class. In the factory committees, which were even closer to the rank-and-file workers, almost all positions went to Bolsheviks. But the Bolsheviks still weren't the majority in all the soviets nationwide.

At this point Lenin proposed a fully left government to the Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks promised to respect such a government and to support it but from the opposition benches. They wouldn't run the state machinery themselves but would support any positive moves such a government made. Lenin had some conditions for such support: the government would have to keep the workers armed to defend against counter revolution and the government would be based on the mass assemblies of workers, soldiers and peasants. Lenin promised the Bolsheviks wouldn't overthrow such a government as long as it acted in workers' interests. The Mensheviks rejected Lenin's offer thereby exposing their own attachment to the right-wing of capitalists and old landed aristocracy. By October the class struggle was at boiling point, the workers were starving, the soldiers were sick of the continuing war and the peasants were burning down the houses of landlords. If the second revolution didn't move forward in a planned fashion, the soldiers and workers would have revolted alone, just like in July 1917, and the whole thing would have been a train wreck. Once the majority of votes in the soviets were going to Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries the time was ripe for a transfer of power to the working class.

The October revolution saw the Bolsheviks lead the workers' soviets in overthrowing the Provisional Government from

the left. This would turn out to be the only occasion where the revolutionary forces got it right.

## French Popular Front

By the mid 1930s a series of French Governments had slashed the incomes of public sector workers and peasants through the pursuit of deflationary policies. The country was on the brink of civil war. There were protests by every class in society. The far right wanted to emulate Hitler's accession to power in neighbouring Germany and street fighting ensued after an attempt by the far right protests to enter parliament. The left was frozen and didn't know how to respond; the Socialist Party (a Labour-style party) was far too timid and the Communists were under the influence of Stalin. At this point Stalin was pursuing the nonsense idea that the main enemies of revolutionaries were the reformists in the Socialist Party.

In February 1934 demonstrations by the far right grew. The communist-led CGT union called a general strike while the Socialist Party separately called for a demonstration. The Communist Party called a protest separate from the others but when the crowds from the two protests came together the rank-and-file workers started shouting 'Unity! Unity!' These protests stopped the rise of the right and led to an electoral agreement between the various strands of the left. But the Communists went further than the 'United Front' (the unity of all working class groupings) and called for a 'Popular Front' with the ruling class Radical Party. In May 1936 this 'Popular Front' got a massive vote. The Communist Party went from 10 to 76 seats while the mainstream socialists were the majority in parliament for the first time. The Socialist Party leader, Leon Blum, was able to form a government with

18 Socialists and 13 Radicals; the Communist Party voted for the government but did not join it. This false appearance of radicalism on the part of the Communist Party would prove fatal to the movement subsequently.

The election of the new government led to an explosion of working-class militancy. There were massive demonstrations on the streets and a massive strike wave spread across France. On May 26th workers began taking over the factories. Thousands of workplaces were occupied by workers who thought 'their' government was in power. The rich knew they had to make concessions to the working class and signed new labour laws agreeing to workers' delegates in the factories. Workers wanted more; the working class was beginning to feel the confidence to take over the workplaces and run society in its own interests. The Communist Party was terrified and began to calm down the strikes. Their leader Thorez said: 'It is necessary to know how to end a strike.' The situation wasn't ripe for an immediate revolution in the sense of the October revolution in Russia but instead of ending the strike wave the communists could have called for the establishment of workers' mass assemblies in the workplaces and linked the workplaces together in a national network of councils. This would have created a situation of Dual Power and just as in Russia pointed forward to an eventual challenge to the state machine by the working class. The Communist Party put maintaining their alliance with the upper class Radicals ahead of the interests of the class. They were also taking orders from Stalin in Russia who changed his mind about the Reformists being the main enemy and in the interests of defending Russia wanted Communist Parties to ally with 'progressive' upper class parties to combat fascism. Over a million marched in July 1936 to in support of the government

but the radical left put nothing forward except a call for 'unity' with the Radicals. A test soon came with the eruption of the Spanish Civil War. The Radical Party blocked sending arms to Spanish workers. As soon as the strike wave died down the Radicals then felt emboldened to demand deflationary policies. Leon Blum, after a short spell of reflationary measures, gave in as the capitalist class took money out of France in order to strangle the left. Meanwhile the police, becoming more emboldened, opened fire on anti-fascist protests killing many.

Leon Trotsky warned that:

The greatest danger in France lies in the fact that the revolutionary energy of the masses will be dissipated in spurts, in isolated explosions like Toulon, Brest and Limoges, and give way to apathy. Only conscious traitors or hopeless muddleheads are capable of thinking that in the present situation it is possible to hold the masses immobilised up to the moment when they will be blessed from above by the government of the People's Front. Strikes, protests, street clashes, direct uprisings are absolutely inevitable in the present situation. The task of the proletarian party consists not in checking and paralysing these movements but in unifying them and investing them with the greatest possible force.<sup>3</sup>

Blum resigned in July 1937 and a series of Radical Party governments ruled France with some participation by the Socialists. The state saw its chance and

moved against the workers with police invading the occupied factories. Renault workers were forced out of their factory by cops who made them give a fascist salute. Workers were assaulted by the police. Thousands of sackings followed as the confidence of workers began to drop and the bosses gained the upper hand. Parliament then banned the Communist Party. The potential for revolution was lost.

## The Attlee Government in Britain

The Attlee Government is still used as a reference point for some on the radical left. Ken Loach's film *The spirit of '45* is one example. In 1945 millions of workers voted Labour because they rejected completely the experience of Tory rule and the mass unemployment of the 1930s. This resulted in a massive Labour majority of 146 seats. Attlee's government did carry out radical reforms. In the six years 1945-51 unemployment in Britain never passed a quarter of a million. The Attlee government also established the welfare state. In those years despite the economic difficulties after the war they built 200,000 council houses. The National Health Service was established and was completely free of fees as was secondary education to 15 in state schools.

In 1945, Labour's manifesto *Let Us Face the Future* had stated: 'The Labour Party is a socialist party and proud of it ... its ultimate aim is the establishment of the socialist commonwealth of Great Britain.' Labour promised a 'mixed economy' and Nye Bevan talked about the nationalisation of the 'commanding heights'. In reality 20 percent of industry was nationalised - the railways, mines, gas and electricity. But this was still a capitalist gov-

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<sup>3</sup>L. Trotsky *Whither France* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/whitherfrance/ch03.htm>

ernment. These particular industries were on the verge of grinding to a halt and nationalisation saved them. The Labour leadership also remained happy to believe in the concept of Empire. Attlee himself, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison were all stirred by the sentiment of the 'jolly old Empire'. By 1951 Britain was still a profoundly unequal society, in which 1 percent of the population still owned 50 percent of all private capital. They also sent in troops on 18 different occasions to break strikes, left the former bosses in charge of the newly nationalised industries, and re-imposed dental and prescription charges in 1951.

The context of this Government was the long boom, with full employment that started during the war and continued for nearly 30 years. This boom was the context for widespread support across the entire ruling class for reforms. Attlee's government should be seen as continuing the war-time consensus in favour of state-run capitalism and the mixed economy. Even the Tory Lord Hailsham understood the potential for post war dissatisfaction to lead to revolt and stated 'If you do not give the people social reform, they are going to give you social revolution'. The reforms were based on the recommendations of the 1942 Beveridge Report, named after its author, the Liberal civil servant Sir William Beveridge. So there was widespread ruling class support for a reforming government that would dissipate working class anger. The key factor in terms of British capitalism delivering those reforms was the post war boom and the high rates of profit. There was an unprecedented temporary compatibility of accumulation and reform - a threat of mutiny post war - the Attlee experience was therefore unreproducible without the whole postwar economic and political scenario.

## Popular Unity, Chile 1973

The army moved with great speed. By 8am on the morning of September 11th 1973 they had seized ports, bombed radio stations and taken most of Chile into their hands. By 2.30pm, after aerial bombardment by both jets and a helicopter gunship, the Presidential palace fell and left-wing president Salvador Allende was dead. In the aftermath of the coup, General Pinochet began a reign of right-wing terror which decapitated the working class movement. Thousands were shot, tortured, raped and exiled. Women in captivity were even sexually abused with dogs. The Chilean ruling class, with the backing of the U.S. took terrible revenge on the working class for having the audacity to raise their expectations. 30,000 were killed and 130,000 jailed in disgusting conditions. 40,000 people were herded into the National stadium. As Henry Kissinger remarked, displaying the cruel anti-democratic instincts of the ruling classes: 'I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people.'

Salvador Allende and the Popular Unity coalition of the left had been elected in 1970. In Chile and around the world there were those on the left that proclaimed violent revolution a thing of the past. There was now a new 'Chilean road to socialism'. It was supposed to be possible to take over the existing State machinery and use it in the interests of the masses of people. Allende was going to show us a 'new' way to achieve change. At first it seemed that things were improving for the majority of Chileans. Every child got milk. Land controlled by the richest 600 landowners was handed over to 100,000 landless peasants. Workers' hopes were raised. Allende's strategy of 'peace-

ful' gradual change meant appeasing not only the poor but also the Armed forces. He maintained the level of arms spending. He made sure to keep the Generals happy. He also made sure his reforms were no real harm to the interests of Chilean capitalists. 'Enterprises where private ownership of the means of production will remain in force,' it said, 'in terms of numbers they will remain the majority.' Overall it was planned to nationalise only 150 out of the 3,500 firms.

After a year in power everything seemed to be going well for the Popular Unity coalition.. Their votes increased. But at a certain point the increasing confidence of the working class and their demands for greater reforms were becoming incompatible with balancing their interests with those of the capitalist class. The Government had to start making choices. The class struggle escalated as workers thought 'our' government is in power so we should push for more. Allende pleaded with workers to 'limit wage claims' and criticising those who occupied a U.S. bank. He resisted a strike by copper workers and he warned militants they must end their 'illegal seizures of land and property'. The ruling class sensed his weakness. The more the militancy of workers increased the greater the pleas from Allende for restraint. Soon the pleas turned to threats. The rich understood and increased their pressure on Allende to act. Rich housewives marched with their servants banging pots and pans for them. Owners of industry locked their factories and kicked workers out. Through blackmail and sabotage the ruling class fought to get their way. The government took the line that the most militant workers were as bad as the far right; the workers' militancy was 'provoking' the response of the right wing. 'There is an extreme right that traffics in arms and is aiming at civil war, but there

are also 'ultra' groups that call themselves 'left' who are following the same course, playing the role of partner in a mad waltz with their political opposites.'

The Government authorised the Grupo Movil of the Carabineros (police) to use force to break up protests called by workers and students. In the city of Concepcion the Grupo Movil killed a 17-year-old student and left 40 wounded. They rounded up activists from far left groups. They sent paratroopers into poor suburbs. These same paratroopers, sympathisers of the far right, were well aware they were practicing for the day they took on Allende himself. He wound the rope around his own neck. When workers started to demand arms to defend their factories against the growing threat from the right Allende was quick to turn on them:

There will be no armed forces here other than those stipulated by the constitution, that is to say, the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. I shall eliminate any others if they appear.

In March '73 they still received high votes but a massive copper strike from April to July saw the government declare that the copper workers were not part of the working class and call them 'fascists' and 'traitors' despite knowing that those workers had voted 70 percent' for the Popular Unity coalition. There was an attempt at a putsch by the army in June but Allende fell back on support from the 'loyal' elements of the army command. He invited the Christian Democrats to join his Government but they had no interest in propping up a weak government of the left who were clearly in an ever weakening position. In the capital city, Santiago, and in workers' districts mass assemblies of workers were beginning to develop. They were called the Cordones. The role of these was

described by the Peruvian revolutionary exiled in Chile, Hugo Blanco.

Cordon is the term used to refer to the concentration of factories along certain avenues in Santiago ... The working class is organised into unions on a factory basis, and these unions are grouped into federations of the various industrial branches ... As in every pre-revolutionary process, the masses are beginning to create new organisations that are more responsive to their struggle, though for the moment they are not abandoning the old ones. The cordones are a partial innovation in the sense that they continue to make use of the unions, but they are linked by zone, by cordon, rather than by industrial branch. At first the top leadership of the CUT refused to recognise the cordones, and the CP called them illegal bodies. Today this is no longer tenable, and the reformists now reluctantly recognise them in view of the fact that their own rank and file has refused to heed their effort to ignore the cordones.

All the elements for a workers' revolution existed but workers instead of looking to their own power and building their own revolutionary organisation, rooted in the mass assemblies, looked to Allende to solve the crisis for them. A revolutionary party uniting the key militants in the working class could have worked alongside workers who were still Popular Unity supporters but pulled them over to the idea

of all power going to the Cordones. Allende paved the road to the coup by his defence of the existing state machine, his compromises with the right and his attacks on any attempt by the workers to escalate the class struggle or to arm themselves for defence.

## **Sweden - 40 Years of Left Government**

In Sweden the Labour-style Social Democrats have been in power as often as Fianna Fáil. It was only after the Second World War, in the context of the global postwar boom, that major concessions were granted to Swedish workers. Sweden had benefited from its natural resources and location selling iron ore to both sides in the war while maintaining a stance of neutrality. The 20th Century opened in Sweden with a massive surge in class struggle which was brought to an end by the partnership agreements between the unions and the bosses in 1938. The Social Democrats were continually in power from 1932 until 1976. Once the postwar boom collapsed class struggle erupted in the 1970s but those struggles were contained by the Social Democrats with the assistance of the trade union bureaucracies.

The fact that the Social Democrats have to some extent represented the interest of workers while at the same time limiting struggles within the confines of capitalism meant that Swedish workers won a decent health care system, creches and in general a society with far less inequality than countries like Ireland. Over the last 30 years the tax burden has increasingly shifted on to the backs of the working class and there has been a continued assault on the welfare state. In other words once the system began to enter a crisis of profitability - a crisis which premised the so-called

neoliberal age; the paring of profits and welfare provision became incompatible and the Swedish ruling class moved to increase profits by pushing more and more of the societal burden on to the backs of workers.

However, while Swedish welfare provision and improvements equality were relatively good they were not the only country to do so and they were time limited too having been increasingly undermined in recent years<sup>4</sup>. From the 1940s to the early 70s there was an ability for the system as a whole internationally, with high returns on investment, to placate workers' struggles in return for productivity and other deals. With the collapse of profits in the early 70s the capitalist class internationally began to exert pressure on political representatives to get in line with a new neoliberal orthodoxy. Without the post war boom you cannot recreate either the Swedish model or the UK Attlee Government. Those kinds of major reforms are not compatible with a low profit capitalist economy, which is why so many reformists, like the Irish Labour Party, move rightwards in a desire to increase profits and in some distance future to get reforms. They can see their task as getting capitalism healthy first .

## Iceland 2009

On the 6th of October 2008 Geir H. Haarde, the Prime Minister of Iceland, addressed the people to explain the state of the banks. All three of the country's major banks had collapsed and were taken over by the State. From the 11th of October people gathered in front of the Icelandic Parliament every Saturday and held growing meetings, rallies and demonstrations. People called it the 'kitchenware revolution' because of the noise the protesters

made by banging pots and pans. On the 20th of January 2009, the protests intensified. People protesting in front of the Parliament were attacked by riot police.

The protests continued the next day as government buildings were surrounded by protesters.. On the 22nd of January the police used tear gas against the protests. The protest movement created a political crisis and provoked the calling of elections. The Left-Green Movement and the Social Democratic Alliance formed a new government on the 1st of February 2009. There was immense excitement in Iceland and internationally as Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became the first lesbian head of state. The coalition government was not backed by a majority in parliament. The cabinet consisted of four Left Green ministers and four Social Democratic Alliance ministers.

At first they moved to enact measures popular in the movement. They reorganized the Central Bank of Iceland, put a temporary restriction on auctions due to foreclosures and introduced an ethics code for government. Taking their cue from the nationwide protests and lobbying efforts by civil organisations, the new government decided that Iceland's citizens should be involved in creating a new constitution and started to debate a bill on 4 November 2009 for that purpose. People were even asked to unite in grassroots-based think-tanks.

The next election produced a majority Social Democrat and Green-Left Government. The radical left took the Ministry of Finance. As a consequence the radical left found themselves defending the presence of the IMF in Iceland claiming that the IMF had done deals with the prior governments and they had to go along with it. The IMF wanted the government to respect the Ice-

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<sup>4</sup>See Madeleine Johansson 'Sweden's welfare state; myths and realities: a Marxist analysis of the 'Nordic Model' *Irish Marxist Review* 3 <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/31>

save Agreement (which meant paying back the debts of the banks) and the radical left Minister of Finance tried to persuade the nation that for the sake of the economy they had to accept this agreement. The population rejected this in repeated referenda but the government kept on trying to find ways to honour agreements made with the bankers. Iceland nationalised the banks but then privatised them again and most of the creditors sold their stakes to foreign hedge funds. Some 80 percent of households were swamped in housing loan debts. Real incomes dropped. Measured in dollars the fall in income was 42.7 percent since 2007. And so although the population was spared austerity, devaluation was used to drop incomes faster than prices, and people lost over a third of their incomes.

The participation of the radical left in Government led to a demoralisation of their supporters and a return of the right. The parties that had caused the crisis in the first place were voted back in. The culmination of the massive protest movement was the rise of a radical left to Government, but the focus on parliament saw a drop in the protest level and the integration of the radical left politicians into the State thereby demoralising their own support base and handing an opportunity to the right. Iceland's Fianna Fáil were back in power. There was no 'Icelandic Revolution.'

## The Theory of the State

This apparatus, this group of people who rule others, always possesses certain means of coercion, of physical force, irrespective of whether this violence over people is expressed in the primitive club,

or in more perfected types of weapons in the epoch of slavery, or in the firearms which appeared in the Middle Ages, or, finally, in modern weapons, which in the twentieth century are technical marvels and are based entirely on the latest achievements of modern technology. The methods of violence changed, but whenever there was a state there existed in every society a group of persons who ruled, who commanded, who dominated and who in order to maintain their power possessed an apparatus of physical coercion, an apparatus of violence, with those weapons which corresponded to the technical level of the given epoch.<sup>5</sup>

The Marxist position on left government has to be informed by our understanding of the state machine as a mechanism that serves the ruling class. No matter how left a parliamentary government is, it is effectively always in coalition with the capitalists because behind parliament lies its connection to the unelected parts of the state. From the earliest states to the modern day state machine, the essence of the state is 'armed bodies' that serve the interests of the ruling class. The police command is tied into the ruling class. Rank-and-file cops share prejudices as their role in society brings them into conflict with the workers' movement. The Army command are also tied to the ruling class, but the rank-and-file of the Army can sometimes be won over to the movement as they don't come into conflict with workers on a daily basis like the police, but we can have zero illusions in the top brass of either the

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<sup>5</sup>Speech by Lenin 1919 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jul/11.htm>

Army or the Police. There are prisons and courts and a whole unelected bureaucracy that remains in power throughout changes in parliamentary combinations. If a left government steps out of line and the economic weight of the capitalists isn't enough to force submission then the capitalists can firstly argue that attacks on property are 'unconstitutional', using the separation of powers to charge the government from the upper house or courts and if that doesn't work then the army and police command are in the hands of members of the ruling class, those who share their prejudices. The capitalists, aware of their economic power and control over this machinery of state, can tactically retreat from the front-line of the state, hand over parliament to the left and then use all means at their disposal to force capitulation. So clearly any movement that has illusions in the state, and believes that this machinery serves any purpose other than oppression, is blinding the working class to the key task of any revolution - the life-or-death necessity of dismantling these oppressive structures.

The reformists will argue that the state isn't a class state so for example some of those who lead Syriza are from what's called the 'Euro-communist' movement who mis-quote the Italian Marxist Gramsci to justify a slow march through capitalist institutions. The key battle then becomes about taking over the existing State apparatus and thus compromises become permissible in order to obtain that State power. Once you see power as residing in cabinet you can sacrifice a part of your programme to get the other part through, but this is the path towards becoming a Labour-type Party. The more you 'sacrifice' the more your original demands are lost. Revolutionary methods of struggle: protests, mass strikes and workplace occupations are actually the best

methods by which to win reforms as by scaring the ruling class the reforms are more secure and importantly for us they raise the confidence of the working class. The euro-communist position is based on a deep pessimism as to the potential of the working class to liberate itself from capitalist exploitation.

It follows (from the euro-communists' theory) that the key struggle for revolutionaries is not a direct assault on state power, but the struggle for ideological dominance, for what Gramsci calls 'hegemony'. Hegemony is won by a long drawn out process that takes many years and demands infinite patience and sacrifice on the part of the working class. In particular, the working class can only become 'counter-hegemonic' by winning over the main sections of the intellectuals and the classes they represent, because of the crucial role they play in manning the apparatus of ideological domination. The working class has to be prepared to sacrifice its own short-term economic interests in order to do this. And until it has achieved this task, has become the 'hegemonic' class, attempts to seize state power can only end in defeat.<sup>6</sup>

For revolutionaries though the battle to render workers fit to self-govern is connected to the revolution itself- for it is in mass struggle that people throw off ruling-class ideas and begin to grow in confidence. For us the foundation of socialism is

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<sup>6</sup>See Chris Harman, 'Gramsci versus Eurocommunism' <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=239>

not about a slow accumulation of reforms that gradually evolve into a new society - for revolutionaries the key foundation of socialism is the throwing off of ruling-class ideas, what Marx called the 'muck of ages', the pessimistic, sexist and racist filth that flows from the ruling class and is accepted by workers because of oppression and atomisation. No matter how many members of the radical left are elected to parliament we will still live in a society where workers are treated as commodities, bought and sold on the labour market, chained to the power of their boss, where women are treated as second class citizens and objects of men's pleasure, an alienated world where people torture themselves and others. That alienation can only be overcome through struggle. Those same mass struggles also point to an alternative to the repressive state because it is the democratic forms by which workers unite to organise their struggles that can lay the basis of a real democracy. For some the argument will be that the left government is the culmination of the united front. The united front is where revolutionaries unite with reformists in struggle in order to raise the confidence of workers by uniting the class while winning the workers over to revolutionary ideas. In this sense the left government is contradictory as it can both raise worker's confidence and also at the same time it can obscure the path ahead. As Chris Harman put it:

Hence the all-important paradox: the advent of a left government will only strengthen the workers' movement inasmuch as the class, or at least its vanguard, do not have illusions in this government.<sup>7</sup>

So instead of workers growing in con-

fidence, organising mass assemblies, challenging the police, splitting the army and overthrowing the oppressive mechanisms of the capitalist state machine we have obfuscation. For example Poulantzas, a popular thinker amongst euro-communists, says:

..the expression 'sweeping transformation of the state apparatus in the democratic road to socialism' suggests that there is no longer a place for what has traditionally been called smashing or destroying that apparatus. The fact remains, however, that the term smashing, which Marx too used for indicative purposes, came in the end to designate a very precise historical phenomenon: namely, the eradication of any kind of representative democracy or 'formal' liberties in favour purely of direct, rank-and-file democracy and so-called real liberties. It is necessary to take sides... talk of smashing or destroying the state apparatus can be no more than a mere verbal trick. What is involved, through all the various transformations, is a real permanence and continuity of the institutions of representative democracy—not as unfortunate relics to be tolerated for as long as necessary, but as an essential condition of democratic socialism.

This means dropping the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', an unfortunate phrase considering the subsequent history of the revolutionary movement post-Marx but a

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<sup>7</sup>Chris Harman & Tim Potter 'The workers' government' See more at: <http://www.swp.ie/content/workers-government#sthash.Y5I70c3y.dpuf>

key idea nonetheless. For Marx ‘dictatorship’ did not have the resonance it has for us living after Stalinist and fascist regimes. Marx understood dictatorship to mean the taking of emergency powers and, as the phrase indicates, not by an individual or group of individuals but by the ‘proletariat’, that is, the working class as a whole. For Marx the culmination of a revolutionary transformation of necessity is the coming to power of the mass assemblies of workers, where any representatives are on workers’ wages and subject to recall by a show of hands. In other words, Marx is describing direct workers’ democracy rooted in our workplaces and communities. Why ‘dictatorship’ then? Well Marx understood that the rich don’t give up without a fight; they try to use their economic power to destroy the working class movement, by locking workers out of workplaces and moving money out of the economy. But when economic terrorism fails they resort to armed force as in Chile in 1973. In response to this the workers’ assemblies would need to link up on a national basis to hold down the sabotage of the rich. So it’s about defending organic democracy that has grown from below in the name of the majority who exercise that democracy. The best way to conduct struggle is to involve as many workers as possible in the transformative process of the struggle, pointing the way to an alternative to the capitalist state. We can drop the phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ as old fashioned and prone to misunderstanding, but the content of the phrase, and the establishment of a really democratic working class alternative to the state is still an essential, and on occasion life or death, task for the working class. What this means is that revolutionaries push for workers to conduct struggles using the most democratic means possible, to point every struggle towards the

formation of workers’ councils which eventually make their way into the workplaces thereby offering an alternative to the repressive state machine which we are for overthrowing from the left whether or not it has a left colouration i.e. we want to replace the state with an alliance of councils which might mean overthrowing political leaders like Kerensky or Allende but from the left.

## **Tactics for the present situation**

The debate over left governments and the nature of the State become immediate debates not just because of the rise of the radical left in Greece and Spain but also because of the political crisis in Ireland. Socialists need to engage with workers’ expectations and current level of class consciousness while at the same time explaining in popular language the stunted nature of democracy under capitalism and the necessity for a new, truly democratic socialist system. In the past socialists have dealt with left government through the tactic of ‘external support’ - that means we would never run the oppressive state machinery but we would explain to workers that we are willing to support a left government as long as it acts in worker’s interests but from the opposition benches. We would continue to support a left government as long as it acted in workers’ interests but would be free to mobilise the power of the working class to both fight off the offensives of the bosses and also to move beyond reliance on the left government to forms of working class democratic self-organisation and to socialism, the basis of which is the self-emancipation of the working class. Liberation for workers and the oppressed can never be handed down from on high no matter what the intentions of those who attempt to do so.

In summary the socialist position on left governments is:

1. To welcome the desire for a left government as the first way in which workers imagine an alternative to capitalism. Most workers until revolution will have a 'social-democratic' or reformist consciousness; the growth of this consciousness in the working class and desire for a return to 'authentic' Labour Party politics has to be engaged with and understood as a positive leftward move which we want to continue pulling further left.
2. To understand left government dialectically, in both its positive and negative aspects. As we have seen in the historical examples it can both raise workers expectations but also limit them to the confines of the present system, obscuring the true nature of the state, leading to demoralisation and the re-assertion of the power of the bosses and the right. In some cases the capitalists retreat from the frontline state understanding that a weak left serves the purpose of disarming the working class better than an immediate full frontal assault can.
3. We defend left governments against attacks from the right but do so in order to defend the working class, defend any gains we have made but also, importantly, to bring workers to an awareness of the limitations of the left government itself. We want the defence to be conducted using methods, such as mass strikes, protests and occupations, which spill over into a conflict with the repressive state machinery and point towards socialism.
4. Based on this understanding of the nature of the state machine as a repressive mechanism for holding the working class down, no revolutionary socialist can ever join a government under capitalism. They would be fatally compromised by running the mechanisms we are out to dismantle.
5. Therefore socialists should support a left government but from the opposition benches. We stand in elections for the sole purpose of building the extra-parliamentary struggle.
6. We are for an alternative form of democracy based on the power of working class people forming a national network of mass assemblies rooted in our workplaces and communities where delegates are on a worker's wage and recallable. We want to see a national network of such councils replace the current parliament and the deeper state.
7. We will work with others on the left in broader alliances and with working class activists who have illusions in left government and in the state machine but in all these alliances we must maintain our own revolutionary current which argues for the above.