

# Editorial: Syriza, Podemos and the Left in Ireland

As this issue of *Irish Marxist Review* is being prepared for the printers the latest round of negotiations between Syriza and the EU institutions seems to be coming to conclusion. At the precise time of writing (Tuesday 23 June) it seems almost, but not quite, certain that a deal is going to be agreed - though for how long the deal will last before the Troika come back for more concessions is another matter.

This makes it difficult for an editor to comment without running the risk of being seriously out of date by the time the comments are read. Brian O'Boyle faced the same problem with his article on the Eurozone also published in this issue.

Nevertheless comment is necessary because there is significant debate taking place not just about Greece but also about Podemos in Spain and about their implications for the development of the Left in Ireland and elsewhere. The aim of this editorial therefore is to step back a little from the drama of the current moment and reflect on some of the underlying issues.

But before doing that two points need to be made. The first is that every Irish socialist and everyone on the Irish left will want to condemn the disgraceful role of the Irish Government in lining up with the EU institutions to put pressure on Greece, against the interests of both the Greek and the Irish people. If Marx's motto was 'workers of the world unite!' Michael Noonan's is clearly 'Bankers, bosses and bureaucrats of Europe unite!'.

The second is that the deal which looks like it is being done is not a 'fair compromise' but a terrible deal for the Greek people and a real climbdown by Syriza. It means the continuation and deepening of the austerity that has already inflicted so much suffering on Greece. This climbdown, however, is not a result of a last minute loss of nerve

or betrayal. It is the culmination of a strategy which the Syriza leadership have pursued since they were elected five months ago and which was prepared long before that.

## The Syriza Strategy

So what was the Syriza strategy? It can be described as 'Gramscian', 'hegemonic', 'Poulantzian'<sup>1</sup> or in a variety of other elevated terms but in the end it comes down to this: first assemble as broad as possible a coalition of the radical left in order to win the elections. The radical left here means everyone to the left of mainstream Social Democracy which was deemed to have irrevocably committed itself to both capitalism and neoliberalism and therefore to austerity. And the possibility of electoral victory was given by the massive popular rejection of austerity after years of recession and impoverishment combined with mass resistance on the streets and in the workplaces.

The next stage in the strategy is the formation of a left government which will end austerity, stimulate employment and the economy through Keynesian economic policies (essentially government spending and putting more money in peoples pockets) and carry out a certain redistribution of wealth to reduce the inequality that has been growing so relentlessly, in Greece and everywhere else. While harnessing the power of the state to do this the left government will simultaneously, albeit gradually, work to wrest control of the state from those who currently control it and transform it into an apparatus that will start to shift society, again, gradually, in an anti-capitalist and socialist direction.

This strategy is markedly different from that of 'mainstream' social democracy and Labourism in recent years: the strategy of PASOK, of Tony Blair, of the Irish Labour Party under Gilmore or Burton, of Hollande

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<sup>1</sup>Calling this strategy Gramscian is a serious misrepresentation of the great Italian revolutionary's thought and legacy [See Chris Harman, 'Gramsci versus Eurocommunism' parts 1 and 2, 1977 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1977/05/gramsci1.html>] but is a fairly faithful following of Poulantzas as set out in Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, Verso, London 2000 and critiqued by Colin Barker in 'A 'New' Reformism?' *International Socialism* 2;4, 1979, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/barker-c/1979/xx/poulantzas.htm>

in France or of PSOE in Spain. It differs in that whereas the social democrats are open about their embrace of capitalism and business and reject any talk of anything more than a vague fairness and justice, the radical left has much larger aspirations and deploys ‘erratically’ if not consistently the language of Marxism and transformation. It also differs in that it attempts to draw in and incorporate in the ranks of its coalition much of the far or hard left including revolutionaries and Trotskyists instead of repelling, excluding or trying to crush them.

But how is this strategy different from the earlier strategy of the so-called ‘mainstream’ of the socialist movement, the strategy of German social democracy before the First World War, of the left of the British Labour Party in the days of Attlee and Nye Bevan or Tony Benn, of the Communist Parties in the period of the Popular Front or the 1950s and 60s?

The difference seems largely a matter of language, tone, ‘mood music’ and organisation rather than basic strategy. The ‘old’ language either of Stalinism and its commitment to the Soviet Union, or Labourism and its verbal adherence to ‘socialism’ and the working class has been modified or ‘modernised’ but the essential strategy remains the same: a broad coalition or party to win a parliamentary majority and legislate for a better society on the basis of a mixed economy with some measure of state intervention.

The harsh truth is that this strategy has been tried repeatedly and never come anywhere near getting rid of capitalism or opening the way to socialism. Historically it has had one of three outcomes: 1) the left wins the election and is able to implement some serious reforms which benefit working class people but without in anyway abolishing or transforming capitalism; 2) the left wins the election but is unable to deliver serious reforms because of the opposition of the capitalists and their state and consequently

alienates its own supporters; 3) the left wins the election and this precipitates a crisis and struggle in society in which the left government is defeated by the ruling class, sometimes in vicious counter revolution. The first and obviously best of these scenarios has applied only under circumstances of capitalist economic boom when the system could afford to grant significant reform e.g. the British labour Government of 1945. In conditions of economic crisis it has been the second or third scenarios that have prevailed.<sup>2</sup>

## Is Podemos different?

Podemos is both similar to Syriza and different from it in various ways. It is similar in that its rise, like the rise of Syriza is a product and reflection of popular anger at the effects of austerity and the abject failures of mainstream social democracy. It is different in that it grew less organically out of the traditional left parties and movements than did Syriza which went through quite long period of gestation and development before its recent success. In contrast Podemos was consciously and deliberately created ‘from above’ by a team of intellectuals from the Complutense University of Madrid. Theoretically the main influence on Syriza has been Poulantzas and Eurocommunism, whereas with Podemos it is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. At the same time Podemos more directly reflected and paralleled a specific mass movement on the streets - the M-15 or Indignados movement of 2011 - a movement characterised for a time by its very sharp hostility to all politics and political parties.

These differences lead to differences in language and structure. Whereas Syriza is by name and history a coalition of the radical left and has many unequivocally left wing forces organised within it. Podemos positions itself verbally as neither Right nor Left but at the ‘centre’ or ‘heart’ or Spanish politics<sup>3</sup>. Whereas Syriza has the organisational

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<sup>2</sup>For much fuller discussions of the experience of Left governments see James O’Toole, ‘Socialists and Left Government’ *Irish Marxist Review* 12, <http://irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/148> and John Molyneux, ‘Understanding Left Reformism’ *Irish Marxist Review* 6, <http://irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/viewFile/68/70>

<sup>3</sup>This idea has been strongly critiqued in Kieran Allen, ‘Neither Left nor Right?’ <http://www.socialistworkeronline.net/neither-left-nor-right/>

forms and structures typical of a leftist party e.g a Central Committee, Podemos was initially more open with its input from ‘circles’ at the base but was then more drastically closed down from above by its ‘charismatic’ leader Pablo Iglesias with the substitution of ‘online’ voting for the grassroots democracy of the circles.

The essential strategy, however, is the same: win an electoral majority on the basis of riding the tide of anti-austerity sentiment and govern on the basis of Keynesian economic policies.

Reading Iglesias’ recent article and interview in *New Left Review*<sup>4</sup> what is striking is how overt and explicit this is. Not only is there in it no conception of working class self emancipation or socialism (those who aspire to revolution and socialism are referred to in passing in a tone of pity as self evidently deluded), there is also no notion of working class struggle or class struggle at all. The political struggle is conceived of exclusively as an ideological battle of wits between the Podemos leadership (primarily himself) and ‘the caste’ (note not the ruling class) with the masses as essentially passive observers whose allegiance is contended for through various clever ‘moves’ like attending the reception for the King of Spain in casual dress . This is a battle which takes place primarily in the media rather than in the streets or workplaces and the only goal that counts is winning the election.<sup>5</sup>

There are elements of this in Syriza too - witness the deployment of the ‘cool/ ageing rock star’ and ‘expert in game theory’, Varoufakis, who was going to charm or was it outwit Mario Draghi and Christian Lagarde, and the way in which Tsipras has deliberately adopted the language of Greek national pride rather than the language of class interests - but the tendency is much more developed and theorised in Podemos.

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<sup>4</sup>Pablo Iglesias, ‘Spain on the Edge’ *New Left Review* 93, <http://newleftreview.org/II/93/pablo-iglesias-spain-on-edge>

<sup>5</sup>In this respect, though not others of course, Iglesias’ approach resembles that of the Obama election campaign from which it took its name (‘Yes we can!’ or ‘We can’ ) and New Labour’s use of focus groups and spin doctors

## The Appeal of this Strategy

Why, despite its failures in the past and its weaknesses in the present, does this strategy have such a powerful appeal both to the wider public and specifically on the left?

The first and most important reason is because it corresponds very precisely to the specific levels of consciousness of wide numbers of the people at present. They are rejecting the existing system and the way they have been governed for several decades. They do not wish to be ruled any more by the corporations, the banks and their various political representatives whether Conservative or Social Democratic. But they do not yet, in their large majority, believe that they can rule themselves. Consequently they look to some ‘credible’ new force that might change things on their behalf. This is specifically what Syriza and Podemos claim to be and offer to do. The fact that large numbers of people are newly radicalised or in the process of radicalising, and are therefore unaware of the experiences of the past, assists Syriza and particularly Podemos in presenting themselves as something ‘new’ and ‘untried’.

The second and subsidiary reason, and which applies particularly to ‘the left’, is that many on the left are haunted by the long experience of defeat and marginalisation and are desperate for ‘success’. From the moment they looked like they might win (an election) both Syriza and Podemos were embraced more or less uncritically by many activists on the left.

The main argument in favour of the Syriza/Podemos strategy is not the merit of the strategy itself but the perceived absence of a credible alternative. The main argument for reformism has long been not the plausibility of being able to transform the capitalist state but the belief that revolution from below was not possible. All the arguments from history about the experience of left governments from the Weimar Republic to Allende in Chile can be waived away with

the single sentence. ‘We’ve all failed so far so let’s try something new’.

## **The Left in Ireland**

A great deal of this applies to Ireland. Above all there is the large scale radicalisation of the working class and their rejection of austerity and the old political order. This has been expressed most clearly in the great water charges movement but also in the rise in the opinion polls of Sinn Féin and of the Independents (including the far left). It is also clear that while this mass radicalism includes hatred for Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil it is not yet clearly defined or revolutionary socialist. It is therefore not in the least surprising that there should have emerged forces in Ireland seeking to reproduce here, and place themselves at the head of, something similar to Syriza/Podemos. Obviously I’m referring to the so-called ‘Right2Water Unions’ and the activists associated with them and to their initiative in drawing up a statement of Principles for a Progressive Government.

Clearly this is in a number of respects a very positive development. The radicalisation of working people and the mass movement is of course wholly positive. So too is five trade unions breaking from the stranglehold of SIPTU and Labour. If the process facilitates some kind of common left front at the election with a minimum programme of shared principles and an agreement to transfer votes to each other that will also be very helpful.

There are, however, some difficulties and differences in the situation. One difference/difficulty is that the relative weakness

of the left and the trade unions in the past means that this project does not have a large pool of activists to draw on. The fact that the water charges movement, for all its size, did not really match the level of active struggle in Greece or Spain in 2011, reinforces this problem. It is extremely unlikely that the radical left as such can win the next election whatever it does.

Another difference is the existence of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin will doubtless sign an abstract statement of vague principles but it is not going to subordinate itself organisationally to any sort of coalition of the radical left. It will contest the next election in its own name, with its own programme and its own candidates in more or less every seat in the Country.

A final difference, negative or positive depending on your point of view, is that relative to the trade union leaders and the left reformists the forces of the hard and the revolutionary left (by which I mean principally the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit) are quite strong. I have no desire to exaggerate this but the balance of forces is certainly more favourable than exists in most of Europe.

This makes it possible for us, the revolutionaries, to participate alongside others in the endeavour to defeat the government and oust the political establishment, without dissolving ourselves or politically subordinating ourselves to a strategy which limits itself to reforming the capitalist state. In doing so we fight for every small step forwards but we understand that the ultimate goal is not ‘left’ victory in a general election but victory for the working class over capitalism.

**- John Molyneux**