

Two points of view on the Greek Left, Syriza and the responsibilities of the European Left

Friday 1 June 2012, by [GARGANOS Panos](#), [KOUVELAKIS Stathis](#) (Date first published: 29 May 2012).

We reproduce below, from *Socialist Worker* (UK), an interview of Panos Garganas, leader of the SEK (Socialist Workers Party—the British SWP’s sister organisation in Greece), and an open letter sent in answer from Stathis Kouvelakis.

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An open letter regarding the Greek left

Disagreements are not only normal and, in any case, unavoidable within the left. They can also be productive provided they are formulated in terms that do not excessively distort the positions of the interlocutor.

In a recent issue of *Socialist Worker* answering the question “What shape has Greek reformism taken?” (the terms of the question seem already biased to me), Panos Garganas summed up Syriza’s position in the current situation as follows: *“Syriza’s leaders promise we can escape from austerity by reforming the EU.”*

“They say a left government shouldn’t take unilateral steps like cancelling the debt and breaking with the euro. They seek a negotiated exit from austerity. They claim a budget with a surplus would strengthen Greece’s negotiating position with its creditors.

“This effectively postpones the promise to end austerity until the German government and banks agree to it. That’s why Antarsya says we need a strong anti-capitalist left and a continuation of the strikes.”

With the exception of the last sentence, I’m afraid this statement is quite far from giving an adequate picture of Syriza’s position but also of the lines of demarcation within the radical left and, more broadly, within the current conjuncture.

It is true that Syriza’s general position is in favour of an internal transformation of the EU, but on the basis of denouncing all the existing European Treaties (Maastricht, Lisbon etc).

It is also true that Syriza is against exiting the eurozone, although significant currents both within Synaspismos and in other components of this political front (which, by the way, also includes many significant organizations of the Greek far Left, mostly from Maoist and Trotskyist backgrounds) are in favour of such an exit (or of considering it as an unavoidable consequence).

But Syriza won the support of the majority of the left electorate, and, as its leading position in recent polls suggest, probably of a relative majority of the Greek people as a whole, not by proposing to wait for an EU reform or negotiations to end austerity but by electing a unitary government of all the anti-austerity forces of the left.

Such a government would immediately, as “its founding act” like Alexis Tsipras keeps on repeating, abrogate, by a vote in Parliament, the whole framework of the infamous Memorandums. The Memorandum is non-negotiable, stating the contrary would be like “trying to negotiate hell” as Tsipras also recently said.

On that basis, and that unilateral move, an anti-austerity government would ask for a renegotiation of the debt in order to write-off the major part. If this demand for renegotiation is rejected then Greece would stop the repayment of the debt, declare a moratorium which would last as long as necessary in order to allow a favourable outcome of the renegotiation, along the lines that similar negotiations have taken in the past (more recently in Argentina).

Syriza says that these moves will not entail an exit from the eurozone nor the interruption of the current payments to the country given as part of the bailout plan.

The statements of EU officials and European leaders claiming the contrary are presented as a propaganda war aiming at putting pressure on the electorate and blocking the rise of Syriza. This position, it should be stressed, reflects the mood of the vast majority of the Greek population, which rejects austerity but doesn't want an exit from the eurozone.

It also corresponds to the fact that, as Larry Elliott wrote in yesterday's Guardian, 'Europe has form when it comes to ensuring that electorates vote the 'right' way'.

It is nonetheless true that it seems extremely unlikely that the EU, representing the interests of Greece's creditors, and more broadly of European finance capital, would not react to the unilateral exit from the Memorandum-based austerity framework.

Recent statements of Syriza leaders show an awareness of the necessity for such a contingency plan, but its lines remain very unclear, since it would almost inevitably amount to exiting the euro and immediately defaulting on the debt.

The two logical possibilities that appear, if Syriza wins the June 17 elections and leads the next government, are either surrender and reneging on the commitment to abrogate the memorandum, which would amount to an unmitigated disaster not only for Syriza but for the entire radical Left and, moreover, for the Greek people, or engaging in a protracted battle which would almost certainly lead to results that go beyond the current objectives put forward by Syriza.

This would conform I think to a quite familiar in history pattern of processes of social and political change, where the dynamic of the situation, boosted of course by the pressure of popular mobilization, pushes actors (or at least some of them) beyond their initial intentions. This is what scares most the dominant forces in Greece and in Europe and explains their hysterical campaign against Syriza and the perspective opened up by its possible coming to power.

The stakes of this battle are immense, probably the more significant we had in Europe since the Portuguese Carnation Revolution. In such a context, all the forces of the radical Left should work together as closely as possibly, not only on the terrain of struggles and mobilizations, which is the indispensable starting point, but also politically, to help the situation to radicalise and to unleash its full potential.

Sterile polemics, reiterating the all-too familiar pattern of 'unmasking the reformist enemy', should therefore be avoided in favour of fraternal discussion, which includes of course in-depth clarifications of the real and welcomed disagreements between the forces of our camp. Our responsibilities are huge, millions of progressive people have their eyes turned to Greece as a name, and place, for hope, and of a concrete possibility for a long-overdue popular victory.

Stathis Kouvelakis, London

** From Socialist Worker (UK), Issue: 2305 dated: 2 June 2012 Letters
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<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=28641>*

What are the next steps for Greece?

Panos Garganas spoke to Socialist Worker about a Greek exit from the euro—and the tasks for the left

What will an exit from the euro mean?

Panos Garganas - The conservative New Democracy party and the Labour-type Pasok say it will be a catastrophe.

The truth is, it will be a break with the austerity imposed by the European Central Bank and the European Commission.

An exit can break this vicious circle if it is part of an anti-capitalist programme that will cancel the debt and nationalise the banks under workers' control.

It depends who takes the initiative. An exit imposed by the European Union (EU) may be punitive action. One organised by the left, a people's default, can make the bankers pay—and give a lead to workers across Europe.

What do you make of the caretaker government?

Their only mandate is to organise elections. In reality, they're entrenching themselves in office, anticipating a political crisis.

The ex-chief of staff of the armed forces was appointed defence minister. The chief of police took over the Home Office. The chief economic adviser under former prime ministers Papandreou and Papademos is now finance minister. The prime minister is a judge.

There are left-leaning figures too, but the overall picture is a bad omen for struggles to come.

The scene is dominated by the 17 June election. But there were strikes last week.

A new law imposed with the bailout threatens more pay cuts. Workers in the food and leather industries, along with printers and bookshop workers, struck together.

What does Golden Dawn's vote reflect?

The electoral success of this neo-Nazi group came as a shock for millions of people.

In part it was orchestrated from above. Electoral analysis shows that almost half of police personnel voted for the Nazis.

But there were people who thought they were voting to punish mainstream politicians. Small shopkeepers, ruined by the crisis, gave a frightening 19 percent to Golden Dawn. An urgent task is to isolate the hard core from these people.

What is Antarsya?

Antarsya is the Alliance of the Anti-Capitalist Left, born out of the revolt after police shot dead a 15 year old student in Athens in 2008.

It brought together strands of the revolutionary left dating from the 1973 Polytechnic uprising against the military Junta, the New Left current that broke away from the Communist Party when it entered government with Greek Tories in 1989, and student and trade union militants.

Syriza is the Coalition of the Radical Left. Its main component is Synaspismos, whose roots are in what used to be called the "eurocommunist" left.

Militants of Antarsya and Syriza work alongside each other in many struggles, in the strikes and occupations of the squares.

And what is SEK?

SEK is the Socialist Workers Party—the British SWP's sister organisation in Greece.

We started as a small group in 1972 during the dictatorship and grew by relating to student struggles and workers' fightbacks.

We worked with Synaspismos comrades in the European Social Forums, but always insisted on an anti-capitalist orientation.

We played a key role in the formation of Antarsya.

What shape has Greek reformism taken?

Syriza's leaders promise we can escape from austerity by reforming the EU. They say a left government shouldn't take unilateral steps like canceling the debt and breaking with the euro.

They seek a negotiated exit from austerity. They claim a budget with a surplus would strengthen Greece's negotiating position with its creditors. This effectively postpones the promise to end austerity until the German government and banks agree to it. That's why Antarsya says we need a strong anti-capitalist left and a continuation of the strikes.

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The following should be read alongside this article:
<http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=28592>

