

# Greece: answering the critics of a united front

Friday 1 June 2012, by [BURGIN Andrew](#), [HUDSON Kate](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2012).

Greece stands on a precipice. There can be no return to the old politics there and a revolutionary situation is emerging amid the chaos of everyday life. The classic conditions for revolution are present: a working class no longer prepared to live in the old way and a ruling class no longer able to rule in the old way.

Even the people who decide to end their own lives are not doing so quietly. They are going to the squares to die and they are leaving messages that talk not so much of their own despair but of struggle – ‘hang the bankers and the politicians’, said one.

The political situation in Greece has to be resolved either by the working class or by the forces of reaction – there is no third way. Either Greece will have a workers’ government or the forces of the extreme right will grow and threaten the existence of the left as a whole.

One force has emerged on the left and has galvanised mass support – Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left, a coalition of communists, Maoists and Trotskyists and other progressive currents. In Marxist terms it is a left-centrist formation – different in essence from the Socialist Party in France or the Labour Party in Britain.

Syriza has come under fire, since its stunning election result in May where it went from 4.4% to 16.8% of the popular vote, from the entire Greek establishment – from all the media and the main bailout parties. The attempt to demonise Syriza is also being promoted throughout the whole of the European Union and the Troika have concentrated their fire on Syriza. You only have to listen to the lectures being given by Christine Lagarde, the head of the IMF, about Greeks not paying their taxes to know which way the wind is blowing.

Syriza have rejected the bailout terms. The party has refused the memorandum and called for the defence of workers’ rights. Their leader Alexis Tsipras outlined 5 demands that a new government would undertake. In addition Syriza are on record as calling for the complete nationalisation of the banks.

There is no doubt that Syriza is under enormous pressure to compromise its principles and that within Syriza there may be rightist tendencies that might buckle under pressure from the EU and others. These are decisive days in Greek politics. In this situation what should other forces on the left do?

This week major comment pieces have appeared in the two main left papers in Britain, the *Morning Star* and the *Socialist Worker*, written by Kenny Coyle and Alex Callinicos respectively. Rather than calling for critical support for Syriza in opposing the memorandum and defending the working class both articles argue that the working class have chosen the wrong party to support – ‘it should have been me’ shout the jilted revolutionaries and expecting a quick divorce proclaim that once the working class have come to their senses it will be [one] of them.

The sister party of Socialist Worker [SEK] works within a much smaller left coalition than Syriza called Antarsya. Antarsya picked up 1.2% of the vote in the May general election. They did not pass the threshold for parliamentary representation in Greece which is 3% and although they are standing again are unlikely to increase their vote significantly and certainly not to that threshold – as Callinicos admits ‘I don’t expect Antarsya to get a big vote’. Callinicos is not wrong here – polls show Antarsya support dropping to 0.5% – the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition got more votes on the London Assembly list.

So why are they standing?

Callinicos’s main point seems to be that the election itself is not that important. In fact his piece is titled ‘Greece’s real battle comes after the election’. So the election is not a real battle – the real battle is taking place on the streets in the struggle against the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. No one doubts the bravery of Antarsya comrades and their commitment to anti-fascist work. Their offices have been attacked by the fascists in recent days because they are at the heart of anti-fascist work in Greece. Everyone there knows that.

But this is not a good reason for Antarsya to stand against Syriza and possibly deny it the possibility of becoming the largest party – which given the peculiarities of Greek electoral law gains an extra 50 seats. In fact in return for calling on its voters to support Syriza it should put down a number of proposals for joint anti-fascist work – some of which could only be introduced by a government – outlawing paramilitary activity, purging public institutions of Golden Dawn supporters.

Elections are important and the May election saw the vote for Golden Dawn increase from 0.3% to almost 7% – this has emboldened them and they have been at the heart of anti-immigrant riots in Patras this week. They are not fascists in suits but fascists in uniform and bearing arms. Almost 50% of the police voted for Golden Dawn.

Callinicos argues that Antarsya has a distinctive programme and lists Greek default, bank nationalisation, shorter working day and leaving the Euro. It’s not that distinctive – in fact the KKE has the same programme and Syriza has three of the four. They only differ on the question of the Euro – and there are those who support Syriza such as Costas Lapavistas who are arguing for Greece to leave the Euro. The question of the Euro anyway does not lie in the hands just of the working class – the Troika are making preparations for Greece to leave the Euro. In any case a distinctive political position does not have to be jettisoned because you lend electoral support to another organisation. The SWP would presumably not dream of standing against Jeremy Corbyn in his constituency especially if it jeopardised his seat.

Callinicos argues that the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and Antarsya are the most important forces battling against austerity on the ground. If this is the case why has the working class in a period of struggle turned to Syriza? The fact is that this is simply untrue. The Coalition of Resistance took a delegation of national trade unions to Greece and saw for ourselves how embedded Syriza was in the struggles of the class – it was Syriza who took us to the town councils in the working class areas of Athens at Nea Ionia and Ellinikon where local committees have been set up to distribute cheap food and free medical care.

Syriza are arguing for and part of setting up committees of action throughout Greece. In a poll last week for the Greater Athens area they were at 31% – the working class is looking for a left party willing to take office and improve their daily lives. Nobody is arguing that the KKE and Antarsya do not contain good militants devoted to the class but they are being misled – and many are now joining Syriza. Callinicos says that ‘the stronger Antarsya’s voice the greater the pressure will be on Syriza to stand firm’. But as Antarsya’s electoral voice is likely to be diminished it is hard to see the value of

this position. In fact, the decision of Antarsya to stand weakens the whole left and makes it more likely that Syriza will not be able to form a government and if the left is disunited the forces of the right will grow. Antarsya should either be inside Syriza arguing its politics or – if remaining separate – calling for a critical vote for Syriza.

What of the KKE?

The KKE received 8.8% of the vote last May and had MPs elected. Nobody is calling for them not to stand. They should. The question is what their MPs will do when elected. Will they support the formation of a Syriza-led workers' government or will they open the door for the pro-bailout parties to return?

Comrades in Athens tell us that the main message of the KKE is 'Don't Trust Syriza.' The KKE leader, Aleka Papariga, has refused to meet with Alexis Tsipras and, according to Kenny Coyle, has reserved her sharpest words for Syriza – not for the forces of the bourgeoisie. Coyle's article strives to explain the politics behind this extraordinary decision: to make attacking Syriza – a party of the working class – central to the work of the KKE in the forthcoming election. From the KKE's own publications it is clear that it sees Syriza as part of a 'facelift' of the Greek political scene organised by the bourgeois class 'in order to preserve its power'. But the reality is that the regrouping of right-wing forces around New Democracy and the political and media war against Syriza comprise the attempts of the Greek – and European – bourgeoisie to preserve its power.

The KKE analysis and approach has diminishing support from the Greek working class, and like Callinicos, Coyle acknowledges that his sister party will fare badly at the polls. But the KKE is determined to disregard the desire of the Greek workers to choose political representation that will take concrete steps in their interests – an intention clearly outlined by Syriza. Coyle tries to explain why the development of the mass movement in Greece, with numerous general strikes and mass 'can't pay won't pay' campaigns, has led to the rise of Syriza electorally but not the KKE. He is forced back on the KKE argument that Syriza has pulled the wool over the workers' eyes – that they are lying to the working class and must be exposed. But the great weakness is that the KKE's exposure of the great Syriza 'confidence trick' relies on words and propaganda alone. The hollowness of this approach is dismaying given the gravity of the situation facing Greece. The real test of the KKE as a workers' party would be in joining a Syriza-led workers' government and holding it to its pledges.

The terrible irony is that Coyle says the KKE would support a Syriza government if it had a plan B – a programme to deal with exit from the Eurozone. The problem for the KKE is that their decision not to critically support a Syriza-led government will lead to Christine Lagarde's plan A – further austerity measures being imposed on the people of Greece by a New Democracy government supported by PASOK and others.

The great tragedy is that the KKE and its supporters are willing to pursue this hand-washing isolationist line, expecting electoral losses to be short term and assuming that at some point in the future the working class will rally to the KKE: a kind of 'after them, us' analysis. As Coyle observes, the KKE has decided it is better to suffer short-term electoral losses than to participate in a Syriza-led government whose policies 'will result in rapid disillusionment and the demobilisation of Europe's most vibrant extra-parliamentary mass movement'. But many will interpret this as an abdication of the KKE's responsibility to the working class, potentially unleashing even more extreme austerity and brutality on the Greek people at the hands of a resurgent right.

As Marx said, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Coyle and the KKE's argument is one that we have heard that before – it is remarkably similar to those used by the

German Communist Party (KPD) in the late 1920s and early 1930s to defend the decision not to work with the SPD, the German Social Democratic Party. In Germany this led to disaster and the coming to power of the Nazis.

These are momentous days in world history. Capitalism has entered the period of its structural decline. Unlike the 1930s little can be done to halt the ever-increasing economic crisis. A solution in one country opens up economic fault lines in another. The Euro cannot be saved; the real question – and one posed more by mainstream economists than by Marxists – is whether capitalism itself can be saved.

Both Callinicos and Coyle downplay the importance of the parliamentary elections, saying that the real struggles lie on the streets and ahead. What they fail to understand is the relationship between parliament and the street. There is a deep desire amongst the Greek working class for a government that will begin to solve the problems that they are facing. Of course no solution is possible for any workers' government without a mass mobilisation of the people but in their refusal to support a Syriza-led government they are merely vacating the space for the right, undermining the mass movement on the streets and potentially ensuring their defeat.

From Cairo to Quebec via Athens and Mexico City and Santiago millions are fighting back.

The task for socialists is to try and unite the working class under a single banner.

Callinicos and Coyle take a sectarian approach – sectarian in the sense that they represent the interests of their political currents and confuse those with the interests of the class as a whole.

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**P.S.**

\* From Socialist Unity website (guest post):

<http://www.socialistunity.com/greece-answering-the-critics-of-a-united-front/>