

# **A round table: What kind of solidarity with the Greek people?**

Saturday 7 February 2015, by [BALIBAR Etienne](#), [GEORGE Susan](#), [WURTZ Francis](#) (Date first published: 30 January 2015).

## **The facts**

On Sunday 25 January Syriza won a historic victory, scoring 36.34% in the Greek elections. Just falling short of a parliamentary majority, the radical Left coalition announced the formation of an 'anti-austerity' government.

## **The context**

The Greek government led by Alexis Tsipras is not isolated in Europe when it comes to renegotiating the debt. Though it has met with intransigent reactions from the Troika, the finance markets and the pro-austerity bigwigs, it does enjoy the support of Podemos, the Front de Gauche, Die Linke, the powerful German trade union DGB, and many more.

**Pierre Chaillan and Jérôme Skalski - In giving Syriza a wide margin of victory, the Greek electorate provided it with a clear mandate to free their country from the straitjacket of austerity. What obstacles will this radical Left party now have to deal with?**

Susan George: Now comes the really difficult part. We should hold on tight to the joy that we felt last Sunday night, because nothing's going to be easy for Syriza, Greece or the people in Europe who support them. In his analysis of the results, Syriza central committee member Stathis Kouvelakis - reader in political theory at KCL - did not quite throw a bucket of cold water over our optimism, but, you might say, at least a bucket of tepid water... He noted Syriza's limited progress in the two great urban centres of Athens and Thessaloniki, and the fact that it had less of a margin over New Democracy nationally than might have been expected. And, most importantly, that even before the new Syriza ministers had taken their seats, the coffers were much more empty than had been expected. The state's tax receipts are plummeting. Thus according to Kouvelakis the party programme 'was based on very over-optimistic estimates'. That goes to show how Syriza is going to need our support, since we already know how hostile the Bundesbank and other powerful adversaries are going to be in their dealings with the new Greek government.

**Étienne Balibar:** We should recognise the historic significance of Syriza's triumph. This is the first time that any popular force has proven able to pose a challenge to the 'governance' that has dominated Europe ever since the 'neoliberal' turn. This rupture is taking place in a 'small country', but the Greek experience has its echoes everywhere. Moreover, Europe is one system, and any change 'on the Greek front' will affect the whole. Since the Tsipras government will be active around the questions associated with why it was elected in the first place, the whole European political landscape is going to shift, and conflicts are going to arise. Hence the massive obstacles that it is going to come up against. They will simultaneously come from both outside and inside Greece. We can expect a cold 'no' from the forces headed by the German government and the Commission in Brussels, even though the disastrous effect of monetarist policies is now widely recognised. This leads us to the crucial question: how far will other governments be ready to go in recognising their

error? And then there are the domestic barriers. Part of Greek society has continued to work away organising its corruption: it will not lie down defeated, and it will resort to far-Right provocations if need be. And there are many links between these external and internal obstacles. Take the example of tax evasion. If the Greek governments 'never managed' to tackle this problem, it was because they had no intention of doing so. But that's a problem across Europe, as the LuxLeaks scandal also demonstrated.

**Francis Wurtz:** First of all, we should not forget the obstacles to change within Greece itself! The Right is still strong there, and it is completely reactionary: indeed the former prime minister refused even to show up for the handover ceremony. The far-Right is straightforwardly neo-Nazi. As for the rich and the traffickers who have prospered in Greece thanks to the clientelism practiced under all the previous regimes, they have much to fear from the new government's severe anti-corruption programme. So all that won't make things easier for Syriza... But above all I would like to focus on the European dimension of the tug of war that Alexis Tsipras and the Greek people in general are now going to be forced into. We should recognise the depth of the rupture that this sort of democratic uprising represents, as against the Tablets of Stone of the current European order (its treaties, directives, rules and pacts) and the monolithic way of thinking underlying them. The ayatollahs of (neo)liberal-authoritarian Europe would gladly get rid of Greece if they didn't fear that this would destabilise the entire Eurozone. But now it's the Greek people that's opening a breach in their fortress! Up till now they totally relied on the idea that 'There Is No Alternative' to austerity and introducing 'reforms' (of the labour market, the public sector, the pensions system...), to the point that the countries that were reluctant to go along with this were threatened with disciplinary measures. Or even being taken under administrative supervision by the Troika. But this claim has now been exploded! So now they have to face up to their responsibilities: either they enter into a process that will challenge their dogmas (negotiate the debt, cancel the Memorandum on austerity measures) or they will run the risk of a clash whose consequences cannot be predicted, in Greece and in Europe more generally (particularly in the South). The obstacles that the new Greek authorities face are considerable ones, but in the coming confrontations the European leaders will be far from omnipotent. They can win real victories for the Greek people, and thus for the peoples of Europe.

### **What prospects does Syriza's victory open up for the peoples of Europe?**

Étienne Balibar: Considerable possibilities - but we should avoid drowning everything in rhetoric, since we have a difficult period ahead. What remains true is that the question of austerity is one that's common across all of Europe, and the Greek election will engender hopes in a general democratic renewal. It will have particular resonance in countries like France where parties were elected in order to turn around the neoliberal drift and yet quickly changed their spots, either because they underestimated the importance of the obstacles they faced or because it turned out that they were ruled by private interests. But this situation has its equivalents everywhere: producing the Socialist/Conservative 'cohabitation' that today dominates the EU, but which will now be weakened. And to that we can add one fact of crucial importance, namely that it is not the far Right but rather the 'radical' Left that is shaking up the ruling dogmas and power relations. Perhaps that's the greatest hope that this situation offers the people of Europe, insofar as they are linked by a common history and common interests, notwithstanding their diversity. It is fundamentally important that Syriza campaigned for another Europe - indeed, against populism and nationalism.

**Francis Wurtz:** Syriza's stunning victory is just what the authentic forces of the Left were hoping for. Firstly because the devastation and humiliations that the European Union inflicted on the Greek people were unbearable and any progressive can only celebrate this tremendous awakening of popular sovereignty and popular dignity. Moreover, because the aspirations that have so successfully expressed themselves in Greece are the same as the ones that most Europeans have.

We can remember our own experience in 2005, defeating the treaty for an EU constitution. But this time, in winning the election, Syriza have opened the way: they have broken the taboos apart and reawakened hope. That is why people on the Left want Syriza to succeed and stand in solidarity with them. This widespread sympathy is the Greek Left's main advantage in its difficult negotiations with Brussels. That doesn't mean that I am saying that there will be a 'domino effect' on other European countries: nothing happens automatically. A lot depends on how intelligently the Left operates politically in each country. The Syriza experience can serve as an inspiration: its politics of rallying people together and taking to the social terrain; its ability to avoid the trap of leftist isolationism; and its opening to the European Left, have greatly contributed to this resounding success.

**Susan George:** Syriza's victory offers Europeans - whether in Spain, France or elsewhere - a practical (and pragmatic) political lesson of the highest importance. It is a very simple lesson: unity works. The best, most progressive programme about 'tomorrow' will be just words on paper if you don't manage to get elected. And if the forces to the Left of the Parti Socialiste do not unite then we will not get elected. François Hollande's pitiful volte-face shows that he has understood this basic truth. Hollande, who had always refused to meet with Alexis Tsipras, now wants to have us believe that he always supported what Syriza were doing. He rightly fears being wiped out like [former Greek PM] Papandreou's new party was, or suffering the same fate as PASOK, his longtime Greek interlocutor that now receives just 5 percent of the vote. It's up to us to understand how come Syriza's model worked and act accordingly. In spite of the desperate situation of the Greek people, Golden Dawn did not manage to tempt them. And if we can show that we are united then the Front National will be less able to attract the French people.

### **What forms of solidarity do we need to build in France and Europe, in order to support the movement for Greece's liberation?**

Francis Wurtz: Syriza's victory has changed the nature of European progressives' struggles to 'refund' Europe and the euro. Up till now the ideas we stand for might have seemed abstract or even utopian. From now on all the essential debates will start with the Greek situation. For example: Tsipras has demanded that the debt servicing payments be reduced from 4.5 percent to 2 percent of GDP in order to devote funds to meeting humanitarian emergencies and kickstarting the country's economy. What could be fairer than that? But how should this be financed? Let's ask the question: what should the more than €1tn (that's half the wealth produced in France in a year) that the ECB plans to inject into the European economy by buying up sovereign debt, be spent on? It's time again to advance our proposal for a 'selective credit': this almost-free money should be exclusively devoted to socially useful investment. That's vital for Greece, and indeed necessary across Europe. I think that it's through concrete debates and actions of this type that the lasting, reciprocal solidarity that the Greeks need to succeed (as do we) will grow.

**Susan George:** In this difficult situation we need to trust in Syriza. It is the sole judge of what it has to do, whether or not we happen to like the measures it chooses to take. It can judge the barriers it faces better than anyone. It's not for us to dispense advice - unless Syriza asks for it. Rather, we ought to follow its suggestions as to what is the best way to help it as it crosses a jungle that is teeming with hostile interests. There are forces ranged against Syriza who ardently desire its failure and are not short of means to help bring that about. Such a failure would allow them to shout from the rooftops that 'we've tried everything' but that only the orthodoxy of austerity and the rule of the market can show the right course of action. Above all, and whatever happens, we must support Syriza in its difficult negotiations over the debt. In German the word Schuld means 'debt' but also 'guilt'. So debt is a sin and must be punished. Germany has forgotten that its post-WWII economic success substantially relied on the reduction of its debts and the aid the Allied countries provided. It claims to have forgotten that it never paid the reparations it owed to Greece - and which it still owes! But we should not forget, and we should put these arguments to good use. We also have to

pull apart the neoliberal myths spread by so many politicians and so much of the media: the 'solutions' they propose, from austerity and privatisations to perfectly balanced budgets, cannot resolve anything. Their neoliberal recipes are harmful for the peoples of Europe and exacerbate climate chaos and the destruction of the environment.

**Étienne Balibar:** Our solidarity has to be as wide as possible. Firstly we have to avoid uselessly getting ahead of ourselves. Here we're not talking about beginning a 'European Red Spring', but creating a new relation of forces on a clear basis. We have to strengthen the Europe of peoples as against the Europe of banks. Which also means that all of Europe's peoples must be mobilised: we mainly hear talk of Southern European countries, but I also want to emphasise the need to mobilise the peoples of Northern Europe and in particular the Germans. We have to be able to explain to them that the arguments about 'the taxpayer losing out' don't hold water. More than ever, we need a democratic European politics that transcends national boundaries.

**Interviews by Pierre Chaillan and Jérôme Skalski**

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\* Translated by David Broder.