

Greece - for an anti-austerity government of the left

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Syriza's stunning vote in the recent elections has shaken the Greek and European ruling classes to their foundations. It was a total rejection of the austerity package, on a progressive basis, by 60% of the electorate and has created not only the biggest crisis, but the most significant class confrontation in Europe since the Portuguese revolution of 1974.

The combined left vote was 27%, with Syriza gaining 17%, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) gaining 8% and the Front of the Greek Anti-Capitalist Left (Antarsya) 1.9%. If we add another 6% who voted for the Democratic Left - a right-wing split from Syriza which is against total rejection of austerity because it believes Greece would be kicked out of the Euro and therefore only wants to soften the package - the vote to the left of PASOK was nearly one third of the electorate. The inability of any party to form a government has resulted in the President calling a new election next month on the 17 June, and a caretaker government has been sworn in, led by high court judge, Panagiotis Pikramenos.

Before the election, Syriza was the only organisation to call for a united anti-austerity platform and for a united anti-austerity government if the left won. Syriza has decisively rejected austerity and the bailout conditions imposed in March by the Troika. Alexis Tsipras has called the 130bn Euro rescue plan "an agreement of poverty and wretchedness."

After the result - with the Greek left being offered a unique opportunity to form a government - Syriza again sought the unity of the left and workers movement, approaching the other left formations and the trade unions to try to put together a government of the progressive anti-austerity forces. But this was rejected in a sectarian fashion.

Despite this, recent opinion polls suggest that the new elections could result in Syriza becoming the largest party and possibly forming a government. This is not guaranteed, but the momentum behind Syriza means that the ruling class and political establishment fear a new election. The EU elites have made it clear that they will make the new election into a referendum on the Euro, but that a second anti-austerity vote would mean the expulsion of Greece from the Euro. Massive international and internal pressure is being applied around this ultimatum - and between now and the election it will only increase. This campaign has already boosted the right wing New Democracy, which is now running neck and neck with Syriza in some polls.

It is important that this ultimatum is rejected and the austerity offensive opposed. The Greek workers should take no responsibility for the debt. The demands in Syriza's programme are imperative at this juncture.

Meanwhile, many, mostly middle-class, Greeks have already begun withdrawing hundreds of millions

of Euros from Greek banks – withdrawing 3bn Euros since the elections and investing in safer havens, especially in German bonds. This has raised fears of a run on the banks even before the results of a new election, with serious fears of the banks running out of money and the possibility of Greece falling out of the Euro in the short term. At the time of writing a crucial E18bn cash injection to stabilise Greek banks has been held up – all the Greek banks are on a life support system run by the ECB.

It is to the great credit of Syriza and its leadership that they have held the line against the massive pressure on all fronts, which has been thrown against them. Syriza's election platform is a radical anti-capitalist action programme, which will be an essential baseline if they eventually form a government. It includes:

- A moratorium on debt payments.
- Taxing the rich and a radical redistribution of income and wealth.
- The nationalisation/socialization of the banks and their integration into a public banking system under social and worker's control. The nationalization of all public enterprises, of strategic importance.
- The administration of public enterprises based on transparency, social control and democratic planning.
- The ecological transformation of the developmental model including energy, manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture.
- Well-paid, well-regulated and insured employment, the restoration of the minimum wage and collective agreements, opposition to lay-offs, universal unemployment benefit and the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income.
- A guaranteed minimum income or unemployment benefit, medical care, housing and access to all services and public utilities.
- Price controls and price reductions.
- The introduction of direct democracy and institutions of self-management under worker's and social control.
- Improved of the rights of women and young people in the family, the work place and in public administration.
- The social inclusion of immigrants and equal rights protection.
- Restoration of the pensions and the universal system of social insurance.
- A free health service and universal, public and free education.
- End to tax avoidance and tax havens.
- Disengagement from NATO and shutdown of the foreign military bases.

The manifesto concludes with a declaration that the current economic and social system has failed and must be overthrown! It goes on: *"We are calling for a new model of production and distribution of wealth, one that would include society in its totality. Our strategic aim is socialism with*

democracy, a system in which all will be entitled to participate in the decision-making process."

It is a programme that puts Syriza in good stead for the challenges that will come if they win the election. Cancellation of the debt will be of crucial importance if such a programme is to be carried out.

Syriza is accused of ambiguity over the Euro because they do not call for withdrawal. The fact is, however, that they are dealing with a contradictory situation amongst the population. Whilst a big majority are against austerity they are also in favour of staying within the Eurozone – which are mutually incompatible aspirations. Syriza has rightly confronted this situation with what is essentially a transitional approach. They do not call for exit from the Euro but say that they will make no sacrifice for the Euro. They then advance a series of demands, which are incompatible with membership of the Eurozone. This puts the ball in the court of the EU elites. If they want Greece outside of the Euro they have to expel it from the Euro.

Tsipras has also said the threat to accept more austerity or exit the Eurozone was a high stakes game of bluff, led by Berlin, which would not happen because the Eurozone had too much to lose. This is a clear reference to the threat of 'contagion' within the banking system, which would probably lead to Portugal and Spain crashing out of the Euro and the possible collapse of the Euro itself, with Bond yields going through the roof. This would lead to slump. Merkel has even called for a specific referendum on the Euro to be held alongside the election itself! Division is therefore opening up among economists and within the European political leaderships, with many arguing that the European Union can't afford to allow Greece to leave. This would provide a Syriza-led government, according to Tsipras, with a powerful bargaining position. However, a new 'Marshal Plan' to shore up Greece and Southern Europe would represent a total and massively costly about-turn by Germany, which seems unlikely. It would be rash to assume that this will happen. The stakes are too high. What is far more likely is that Merkel will hold the line and every nerve will be strained to terrify the Greek population into voting for the establishment parties on June 17.

However there is ambiguity in Syriza's position, for while presenting a radical anti-capitalist platform against the bail-out and austerity, Tsipras has also called for negotiations to reform the Euro and the EU. A position of not calling for a break with the Euro is not a political problem if Syriza and its supporters are fully prepared for such an eventuality. In order to advocate debt repudiation, effectively you have to be prepared for expulsion from the Eurozone as a probable consequence. This approach needs to be strongly up-front in the election campaign if the electorate is to be armed against the threats and ultimatums it will face.

In this situation, nationalising the banks, imposing capital controls, taxing and collecting taxes from the rich, canceling internally held public debt, freezing the assets of the wealthy to stop them being moved out of country, will be necessary and urgent moves.

These are demands in Syriza's programme that must be implemented at the beginning of any term of office, so that the new government can pay state employees, pensions, and also importantly, to immediately control the flow of capital and protect Greece from the manoeuvres of international finance. The nationalisation of the banks will allow the government to stop a run on the banks, ring fence the financial system and cancel internally held public debt, which is the majority of the Greek public debt. These are the measures needed to begin the fight-back against the ravages of austerity.

Other measures are also important, such as opening the books to public scrutiny of private companies, the nationalisation under workers control of firms creating redundancies, factory occupations and the building of local support committees, which are already emerging, sharing of the work equally between all those who want to work – work sharing with no loss of pay. Action

should be started to recover the billions of Euros that the ruling class has already taken out of the country.

If implemented these measures would ignite an international explosion, and would have a domino effect elsewhere. There is considerable fear of 'contagion' in the European banking system at a time when the firewall designed to bail out other banks, especially in Spain or Italy, is not yet fully funded - this could result in the collapse of the Euro. A maelstrom could threaten to bring down a new left government in Greece. Consequently a massive mobilisation of the Greek working class and international solidarity will be needed.

A Syriza government should prepare for a possible expulsion from the Euro and devaluation by drawing up a plan to take all necessary measures to protect the working class. A re-introduction of the Drachma in these circumstances i.e., on a capitalist basis, will not be easy for the Greek working class, but will allow Greece to have some control of exchange rates. Weaker economies like Greece and Portugal after entering the Euro became uncompetitive due to suddenly inheriting a stronger currency. An important part of their crisis stems from Euro membership. Under the fixed Euro for all, weaker economies could not compete with Germany, leading to industrial decline and unemployment, but at the same time credit was cheap, encouraging a massive growth of private and personal debt in these countries - enabling them to buy German goods. In effect the German economy is being subsidized by the single exchange rate, enabling it to unload its goods onto countries like Greece or Portugal.

Another important demand Syriza has made is to end tax avoidance. This is on a massive scale and would be difficult to achieve quickly because of entrenched systems of patronage. A restructured tax authority to collect taxes efficiently would be needed. This policy is essential, for clamping down on tax avoidance and corruption and canceling the debt repayments would alone eliminate the Greek deficit.

A Syriza led government that carried out its policy to restore pensions, would have to provide alternative retirement through nationalising the pension system and creating the free provision of all basic needs after a certain age. This would be made possible by offsetting losses from defaults to the country's banks and pension funds, as most public debt is held domestically. This in turn would leave a smaller proportion of the debt owed to foreign banks, pension and insurance funds. The heavy taxation of the rich and wealthy and corporations are important here as well.

Defaulting on the debt repayments and leaving the Euro, which will result, will be essential to put an end to the austerity attacks, boost exports, lifting the burden of debt repayments, allowing the economy to recover, creating jobs and develop by orientating demand towards the internal production that meets peoples' needs in a green sustainable way. A boost in exports would offset the inflationary pressure of devaluation.

If implemented by the Greek people this programme would inspire all of us across Europe who are fighting the same type of austerity attacks. It would be the start of the building of a different type of society - one determined by the people for the people, which will put an end to the greed of the bankers and politicians.

However, as the Greek working class faces another election, there is a serious problem that cannot be avoided - the issue of the unity of the Greek left. Before the election Syriza was the only organisation to call for a united anti-austerity platform and for a united anti-austerity government. If there are new elections both the KKE and Antarsya (though the KKE more stridently) have already said that they will not only stand their own candidates but will not give support to, or would 'not prop up' a Syriza-led government if it were elected! This, they say, is because Syriza's platform is

reformist, and not revolutionary. But a more extensive revolutionary programme is something that must be and will be discussed and developed as the struggle advances and should not to be counterposed by revolutionaries to the immediate needs of the struggle as it unfolds today.

The most appalling sectarianism comes from the KKE, which, in third-period Stalinist style, has declared not only that Syriza is reformist but that reformists are the main enemy! Antarsya rejected the appeal in favour of a call for mass action against the cuts and declared that they would not 'prop-up' a Syriza led government! With the Greek SWP section the main force in Antarsya, this approach is reflected by the SWP in Britain. An article by Alex Callinicos in SocialistWorker has nothing to say about the governmental situation in Greece, or of left unity, but accuses Syriza of ambiguity, of refusing to break with social liberalism, and of seeking to contain the situation within the framework of capitalism. This he says, "underlines the necessity of building a revolutionary left that is part of this great movement sweeping Europe but maintains its own political identity". We can agree with the last sentence but that must be as an active part of the Syriza coalition and with a united front method.

This is a dangerous situation. A victory for the left is not guaranteed, but we could see an anti-austerity government with a radical anti-capitalist action programme either denied office - and the austerity continue with all its consequences - or be opposed once taking office by other sections of the left! We therefore make the strongest possible appeal to all sections of the Greek left to unite behind Syriza in the upcoming elections and to unite behind a Syriza-led anti-austerity government if it is elected. Of course the movement must be vigilant, but in the concrete situation that exists in Greece today, building a broad anti capitalist organisation like Syriza - that can unite the working class - is what is needed, and what revolutionary Marxist currents should be engaged in.

We call on the KKE and Antarsya to break from sectarianism to become part of such a movement and a possible left government. If Syriza carries out its programme, and there will be massive pressures against it doing this, it would be a true Workers Government, leading to the first major political battle in Europe against austerity and the capitalist crisis. The Marxist left should do everything in its power to ensure this succeeds, not stand aside in sectarian purity and isolation.

To conclude, the new elections, in which Syriza stands every chance of becoming the largest party, or winning, could lead to a coalition government of the anti-bailout, anti-austerity forces. The task of revolutionaries is to fully support the formation of such a government, but with vigilance against any compromise on Syriza's action programme. This is particularly important if the reformist Democratic Left holds the balance of power and according to opinion polls two thirds of Syriza's voter in the first round were in favour of a political compromise to form a government. However it is important to recognise that Tsipras has shown no signs of any political compromise on Syriza's programme. He states time and again that the "memorandum of understanding must be revoked."

If at the end of this remarkable opportunity the Greek left and workers movement fails through internal divisions to form a government when the opportunity had been there and the right-wing take control as a result the organisations which opted for sectarian isolation will have a great deal to answer for, and not just in Greece. In fact the strategy of building broad parties (either anti-capitalist parties like Syriza or radical left reformist formations in other situations) capable of uniting the left and radical trade unions across the political spectrum, from revolutionary socialists to those who have not reached such conclusions, is designed for exactly this kind of situation - when no single current or tradition can meet the challenge alone.

It is an urgent necessity for the social movements in Europe to show active, practical solidarity with the Greek people and to constitute a common European platform of resistance to austerity, which in Greece must include cancellation of the debt. In Britain, this means building support for the Greek

solidarity campaign, set up by CoR and the Peoples Charter, and supported by SERTUC and the TSSA. Across Europe it means following up the eminently sensible proposal which appears to have emanated from the indignados movement in the Spanish State for a day of action against austerity on June 16, the day before the Greek elections, with a major focus on solidarity with Greece.
