

INTERVIEW

## A new stage of the resistance in Greece

Sunday 24 June 2012, by [NTAVANELLOS \(DAVANELLOS\) Antonis](#) (Date first published: 23 May 2012).

New elections have been set for June 17 in Greece, and the far-left SYRIZA alliance is currently favored in opinion polls to take first place. If that happens, it would be a stunning blow to the austerity agenda that the bankers, bosses and political elite of Europe have imposed on Greece, in the form of the so-called “Memorandum.”

A first set of elections on May 6 dealt a devastating blow to the country’s two main parties, the conservative New Democracy and the center-left PASOK—which together ended up with fewer than half the number of votes they won in the previous election. SYRIZA, which stands for the Coalition of the Radical Left, catapulted from small-party status to second place. None of the three top finishers could form a government, so new elections have been called.

SYRIZA endured intense pressure to capitulate on its platform of repudiating the Memorandum and rolling back the austerity measures that were a condition of a financial bailout by the European bankers. With that stance gaining in popularity, SYRIZA is calling on left-wing party, including the Communist Party and the smaller anti-capitalist alliance ANTARSYA to work in alliance with the aim of forming a government of the left.

Antonis Davanellos is a leading member of the Internationalist Workers Left, a revolutionary socialist organization that was a cofounder of SYRIZA in 2004. He spoke to Ahmed Shawki and Alan Maass about the outcome of the May 6 vote and what will come next in Greece.

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### **CAN YOU summarize the reasons behind the stunning result for SYRIZA in the May 6 election?**

ANTONIS DAVANELLOS - THE MAIN factor was the resistance of the workers and the people in Greece. In the three years that followed the signing of the Memorandum with the troika—with the European Union, the European Central Bank and the IMF—we saw huge resistance from the workers, from the youth and from the popular masses. This was not just inside Athens, but everywhere in the country. This is the most important factor.

SYRIZA was, from the beginning, very clearly identified as the part of the left that said a clear “no” to the Memorandum and that, at the same time, stood side by side with the people who were fighting. That was very important. And it was easier for us because of our policy of the united front—of the unity of the left and the unity of the movement—is a main characteristic of SYRIZA.

So in their day-by-day experience, people came to the understanding that SYRIZA was a good way to escalate the resistance. That was a major achievement by SYRIZA in the years before the election.

But also, some months before the election, SYRIZA made a point of saying that we can win. That was

important because the Communist Party, which is bigger than SYRIZA, was saying that we can't do anything. As we wrote in DEA's newspaper: "They chose to proclaim to the people that any effort they make to change their lives today, rather than in some sort of 'people's power' regime of the distant future, is a dangerous illusion."

So before the elections, SYRIZA was the only part of the left that was saying that we can win—that we can overthrow the current government and propose a new government of the left. We said that we must take this possibility to put an end to the Memorandum and all of the austerity measures, and permit the people to turn around the cuts in salaries, in pensions, in public schools, in the public hospitals, and in measures of support for the unemployed people.

We faced a very big question on this: Where will you find the money? And on that question, SYRIZA was also very clear.

We said that, first, we will stop the payments to the international and local banks—to the IMF, the European Central Bank and so on. We will stop paying the debt. Second, we said that we will tax the rich in Greece—the corporations and the wealthy. Third, we said that we must take public control of the banks—put the banks under democratic and workers' control.

These answers of where we will find the money are very near to the feelings of huge numbers of people. So that's why there was a popular tide of support to SYRIZA. Before the election, I think that I felt very optimistic in expecting that we would win between 12 percent or 15 percent. At the end of the day, we found ourselves with 17 percent.

This was a political earthquake. Around 3.4 million voters moved away from PASOK and New Democracy, compared to the last election—mainly to the left, though there was also growth for the Nazis. But it's clear that SYRIZA was the main recipient of many of these votes.

### **TELL US more about SYRIZA. What is its presence like in struggles and in neighborhoods?**

SYRIZA IS a coalition of parties and organizations, and but there are also unorganized people of the left who participate. There is no unified political line within SYRIZA, but we have a strong agreement on the main points of the current period.

SYRIZA is organized into local committees. Its connection to local struggles has been very important over the years. And SYRIZA is also supporting a coalition of rank-and-file union workers of the left inside the factories and inside the public sector. At this rank-and-file level, we have very strong relations with the comrades of ANTARSYA. On many levels, we are acting together—in the unions, at the demonstrations, in the big struggles.

So people have seen members of SYRIZA on the front line of everyday struggles. But it was also very important to have a presence at the national political level. People know from what SYRIZA was saying at the parliament, and in the newspapers and the media, that it was supporting the different struggles.

We have faced real pressure, as well. If you remember some years ago, in December 2008, there was a rebellion of the youth in Athens after the police killed a 15-year-old student. For a month and a half, Athens was burning every night. And SYRIZA was the only party that was saying, "Continue to demonstrate, don't go back." This was at a time when SYRIZA suffered a big loss of votes.

But now we are winning the votes of all these people around very important demands of a change from the austerity measures. People have come to understand they can trust SYRIZA.

In this last parliament beginning in 2009, we had only 13 members, but they did good work. The president of our parliamentary group, Alexis Tsipras, was a sharp and explicit critic of the government, in a way that expressed the anger of the people. There are also members like Panagiotis Lafazanis, who raised in parliament all kinds of questions critical in workers' struggles—the cuts in salaries and pensions, the changes in laws that have made strikes more difficult.

And so people understood the general political message of SYRIZA to be that we must resist and that we can win. Both parts of this message were important to our victory—not only resistance, but the slogan of a government of the left that can scrap the Memorandum.

### **WHAT HAS taken place since the election?**

AFTER THE election, the bankers and the industrialists in Greece insisted that there must be a government, and so the two main parties, New Democracy and PASOK, pushed very hard to create a government of national unity or national salvation. They were promising almost anything to SYRIZA if we joined a government of national salvation.

In reality, the pressure was to push SYRIZA inside a government that would continue the policies of the Memorandum, which capitalism needs, not only in Greece, but which the European Union is demanding as well.

It was very important that SYRIZA resisted this, and it was a huge battle every day to do so. All the parties were demanding that SYRIZA take part in the government. And we were saying no—we will not participate in a national unity government. We said that we have declared before the people that the only government we will take part in or form is a government of the left, a government that will change the Memorandum and all the laws that of the last three years, during the period of the crisis.

Now, the efforts to form a national unity government have collapsed, and we are facing new elections in a month. Many polls are saying that SYRIZA will be in first place in the next election—with 20 or 25 percent of the vote, and the expectation is that this number will only grow.

We have an incredible situation. This is not revolutionary, not pre-revolutionary, but we are confronting the fact that in a month's time, SYRIZA will be the leading party in the country.

So we will be called on at that point to form a government that can transform things for the people of Greece. But we also know the reality of our organized forces and what we have inside the banks, inside the army, inside the police. So we understand the challenges.

### **SO WHAT will it mean to prepare for this next election?**

THAT'S A very difficult question because we have a huge responsibility to the people who are supporting SYRIZA. We must ask all the real questions—what is it we want to change and what is it we can change.

We also have a responsibility to transform the situation of the left. We will call again on the Communist Party to have a relationship of unity with us. And we will also call on ANTARSYA to recognize that it would be silly to operate separately in this election—that it's very important to work with us and confront all these very serious challenges together.

At the same time, we must state clearly and honestly inside the people's movements that the only way that we can achieve real changes is when people are organizing and protesting in the streets and in the workplaces—when people get organized and struggle around many different issues, as

well as the larger questions about society.

In the week after the election, when the pressure on us was huge, with groups of capitalists and officials of other European governments demanding that SYRIZA go back and accept the national salvation government, SYRIZA called open general assemblies of people in Athens—65 in all—to discuss the issues.

The participation was greater than anything we've seen before now. For example, in one poor neighborhood between Athens and Piraeus, where a meeting called by SYRIZA might have drawn 30 or 40 people, there were 1,000 people at the general assembly.

### **IS THERE anything that the left internationally should do to support the efforts of SYRIZA?**

ABSOLUTELY. ONE big difference between SYRIZA and the Communist Party, as well as some "national" currents of the revolutionary left, is that we have always insisted that the solution to the crisis must be a European solution. When we say that, we aren't talking about currencies—the euro or a return to the drachma. We mean the solution lies in the relationship between the working-class movements in Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Britain, Ireland and so on.

This is what has historically changed the history of Europe. So we strongly support the building of relationships between the left in Greece and left organizations and parties throughout Europe. If Greece can set an example, then we can change the direction of things in Europe. But we need strong support in this, because alone, we can't do much.

We are keeping our eyes on the huge forces of the working-class movement in Europe, which has traditionally been in Italy, France, Spain and so on. We need the help of all these forces.

It's not a fantasy to look to this kind of solidarity. I remember last year, during one of the worst nights of police violence we had here in Greece, that after many hours of facing tear gas in Syntagma Square in Athens, I got back home and I saw on television some pictures of a demonstration in Spain, with the slogan, "Our brothers in Greece, hold on, we are coming."

That sense of solidarity from below, between the workers of Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and so on, is what we need to change the situation.

I think it's very possible that we'll face some major provocations in the coming weeks. The rulers of Greece are very frightened right now. Until last week, they were hoping that the bourgeois parties would find a solution and create a government. Now they know that hope is finished, and they are very afraid about what comes next. If the elections happen and SYRIZA comes in first place, it will be more difficult for them to stop us—I don't mean it's impossible, but it will be more difficult.

So there are many possibilities of what they could do in a crisis—like close down the banks or stop paying pensions or things like that. And at that moment, we will desperately need the support of the European movement. If Angela Merkel of Germany or any other political leader tries to strangle the government in Greece, we will need the intervention of our sisters and brothers there on the left.

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**P.S.**

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\* Transcription by Karen Domínguez Burke.