

From crisis to resistance in Greece

Thursday 12 July 2012, by [NTAVANELLOS \(DAVANELLOS\) Antonis](#) (Date first published: 5 July 2012).

Presentation:

Greece has a new government led by the conservative New Democracy party, in coalition with the center-left social democrats of PASOK, among others. The country's new leaders claim they will demand a better deal, but Greece under this regime will remain subject to the Memorandums—documents signed by the government which agree to drastic austerity measures in return for a bailout of the country's financial system.

The two parties of Greece's political establishment were nearly beaten by the Coalition of the Radical Left, or SYRIZA. In elections on May 6—and then again on June 17, when the first vote failed to produce a governing majority—SYRIZA finished second overall, and dominated the turnout among workers, the unemployed and the poor, and in Greece's major cities.

SYRIZA represents the continuation of a resistance movement that produced 17 general strikes in Greece; a nationwide movement to occupy the country's public squares, including Syntagma Square in front of the parliament in Athens; and many other struggles.

In the national elections this spring, SYRIZA ran on a radical program of canceling the Memorandum and rolling back austerity measures agreed to by PASOK and New Democracy. In spite of a fanatical media campaign to claim that SYRIZA intended to pull Greece out of the euro—the common currency shared by 17 countries, but on the basis of financial policies primarily dictated by the continent's largest power, Germany—voters twice nearly put SYRIZA at the head of the Greek government.

In this speech given at the Socialism 2012 conference in Chicago, and edited for publication here, Antonis Davanellos, a member of Internationalist Workers Left, known by its Greek initials DEA, one of the founding organizations to form the SYRIZA coalition, talked about the scale of the crisis in Greece, the developing resistance, and what lies ahead for the left.

Socialist Worker

I WILL try to say something about the crisis and about the resistance, then a few more things about the program of SYRIZA, and also about the other parties of the left in this period.

The crisis in Greece has meant a huge attack on the population, and at the same time, a huge impasse for the ruling classes.

Let's start with the attack on the population. By their own numbers and statistics, wages in Greece in the last 13 months have fallen by 26 percent. I don't know of an example like this in the modern history of Europe. And you must remember that in Greece, wages were starting from a low level before the cuts—and that we already had cuts before these 13 months.

During this period of the crisis, by our calculations, the working class has lost almost 50 percent of its real income in three or four years. This is huge. To find another example like this, you must go far back to the past. In reality, you must go back before the Second World War to the period of Weimar Republic in Germany.

The cuts have also been very severe in the pension system. In the last three years, they have cut pensions four times. The pension system became a huge trap for older people who cannot work because they are on pensions. If they don't have other income, they cannot live on their pension. Poverty among the elderly is really shocking in Greece at this time.

But the conditions for workers aren't dependent only on wages, on salaries and on pensions. The cuts in the social spending were really unimaginable. In the first Memorandum, which the social democrats alone signed, it was a rule that the overall austerity program should be comprised of two-thirds cuts in social spending and one-third increases in taxes.

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I WILL give you some examples what these numbers mean in real life. The minister of health—he's a social democrat now, but he came from the Communist Party—was Andreas Loverdos. He is one of the most hated figures in Greece. He destroyed the social security system, and then he started destroying the hospitals. One week before the election, he said that with his party's policies, 20 large public hospitals would be closed before the end of 2013.

The reality in all the other hospitals is very bad—it is unsustainable. SYRIZA underestimated how bad the situation was. During our election campaign, after the intervention of doctors and nurses, we changed our program, and we have put a big priority on saving the public hospitals.

At many of the assemblies held by SYRIZA, doctors and nurses appeared with tears in their eyes, saying that we must do something—because we are very near the moment when these doctors and nurses will have to stand there in the hospitals and say to people that they must not come to the hospitals, even if they are sick, because you would be in danger of dying from lack of medicines and resources.

One very, very important story in Greece is about missing medicines. Greece is a country that produced pharmaceuticals based on the latest technologies—very expensive medicines. But the capitalists preferred to export all this, and now there is nothing left.

I know of an example that was very shocking to me because I know the people involved. In my own neighborhood, at an assembly of SYRIZA, two comrades—members of Synaspismos, one of the major organizations within the SYRIZA coalition—appeared and dared to tell their story. The story is this: One of them is teacher, and the other is unemployed. The woman of this couple has cancer. For three years, she has been undergoing chemotherapy.

But now, the medicines for chemotherapy have run out at the public hospitals. So the hospital told them to go to the free market to find the medicines she needs. These chemotherapy medicines cost more than 2,000 euros per month. Their income is 1,000 per month. They had to go back home and discuss between them: Should we buy the medicine, or should we continue to buy food for the kids?

The numbers are huge—we are cutting so many billions from here, so many billions from there. But this is what they mean in reality. These are real stories of real people, and they aren't only about people who have cancer. In the hospitals, there are no medicines or supplies for people who have diabetes or asthma—for people who need ongoing medicines or treatment.

The conditions are the same in the public schools. This year, books arrived at the schools three weeks before the end of the term—right before the start of the examinations. And in the lower grades, there are a lot of reports of teachers saying that many kids in class can't follow the lesson because they haven't eaten properly for weeks, and so they can't concentrate for long.

That's the reality for the population in Greece. And that explains many things about politics and about perspectives.

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AT THE same time, the crisis has meant an impasse for the ruling class. I remember well the major crisis of the Eastern European countries when the Stalinist regimes fell in 1989. The economic contraction was 12 percent at that time—and that opened up the way for all these political changes that we know about.

In the last three years—not including this year, but the three previous years—the Greek economy has shrunk by more than 20 percent of gross domestic product. The estimation was that this year, the fall in GDP will be 6 percent. Before I left the country, the latest prediction was that the slump would be more than 9 percent by the last three months of the year.

Then there is the question of Greece's debt. The ruling class is supporting an absolutely crazy formula. Greece's debt, after 10 years of huge austerity programs and economic depression, is predicted to be equal to its debt in 2009. In other words, if things go well for them, by 2020, the debt will be exactly the same as it was in 2009. And all the sacrifices of the population will be for nothing.

Every year, the Greek public funds make interest payments on this debt of around 16 billion euros. Debt on this scale, comrades, cannot be paid.

So you find in the press speculation that the end of this process will be a chaotic bankruptcy—a disorderly exit from the euro under the power and the continuity of the capitalists in Greece. I don't know whether the European Union will throw Greece out of the euro, because Greece is connected with the future of the euro and the euro is connected with Greece. But I'm sure that if these policies continue, it is very possible that the end of the process would be default and a disorderly return to drachma.

The reality is that Greek capitalists prefer to stay in euro, whatever the cost. But the danger remains that after all the austerity measures taken in the name of staying with the euro—of what they call an "internal devaluation inside the euro"—we will face a new austerity after being thrown out of the euro, with huge attacks and a further drop in anything of value that working people possess, from salaries and wages and pensions, to savings, houses, land and so forth.

The former Prime Minister Costas Simitis has described what a return to the drachma would mean. When Greece entered the euro, the exchange rate was 340 drachmas for one euro. Simitis believes that if Greece exits the euro, the exchange rate will be 550 drachmas for one euro—and in a week, the new drachma would be further devalued by 100 percent.

We must not forget that as we are speaking, the richest people in Greece have more than 600 billion euros in the banks of Switzerland, Britain or even more exotic places like the Cayman Islands. So you can imagine an economy with two sides—one for workers, using the new devalued drachma, and one for the rich, using the euros in the banks in Switzerland.

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I NOW want to go from the crisis and speak about the resistance.

The backbone of the resistance has been the working class movement—a series of strikes, then a general strike, then a new cluster of walkouts, a new general strike, occupations and on and on.

As an aside: Remember, comrades, how many times you heard about the end of the working class movement? We are happy this never happened. And that itself is important for the left, the political current that tries to change the society based on the mobilization and in the interests of the working class movement. So the first point is that Greece has given us many examples of working class power that are important to the discussions about whether you need a new movement and things like that.

The second point is that this resistance has spread everywhere in Greek society. We say that we are protecting public space in Greece. That means that every public hospital has become a fortress of resistance—not only, by the way, involving the workers inside the hospital, the doctors and nurses, but the people who are in the hospital and their friends relatives. Everyone together works to protect and save the hospital.

Around the hospital is the neighborhood, and the chains of solidarity are built between them. The same is true with public schools. The same is true about child care facilities, which are absolutely crucial for working-class families. But it's not only that—it's parks and other public facilities.

This is the public space that we are protecting against privatization, against speculators and against austerity.

My third point is that in these circumstances, the organization of the people is growing and spreading. And I'm not speaking about strictly political organizations.

At the beginning of the struggle, the left created committees from below. The most successful of these was the "I Won't Pay" committees—of people who said they won't pay taxes, they won't pay tolls on the road from Athens to Salonica. It was a very successful campaign. And around these committees, further chains of solidarity were created.

But this was only the beginning. After the rise of the movement to occupy the public squares last year, we created what we call popular assemblies, meeting in the neighborhoods. This was very important. In the beginning, it was only SYRIZA and ANTARSYA and some anarchists. Now, these assemblies are real. And that means in the neighborhoods, one day each week, people are getting together and discussing about what we have to do, or what might need something in the neighborhood, or how we confront the fascists, or other questions.

In the unions, there are very important developments. With every union election, the social democrats and the right wing are losing positions, and the left is winning positions. But that isn't enough. So around the unions, there are many coordinating committees made up of rank-and-file fighters. All this is very important, but even this isn't enough to confront the duties that we have.

My last point about the resistance is that politics have become more and more important to people. The question of power has appeared as the only method to save our basic workers and social rights.

People have started to understand that even if you have a legal contract that says if I work eight hours, I will get this kind of money, in order to actually get it, you must overthrow the government. Because the owner says, "Yes, I want to give it to you, but the government says 'no,' and the Memorandum says 'no.'" So you must overthrow the government or the memorandum, and you can only do this together.

This tendency has appeared electorally. SYRIZA has posed in the elections the question of power—the question of who controls the government. This isn't control of the state or the whole economy or society at large. But these are the first steps of the politicization of the people.

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I WANT to say some things next about the program of SYRIZA.

The important question is the priorities that SYRIZA is highlighting and the public discussion about these priorities, which engaged people with the party. These are the top priorities from SYRIZA.

The first priority is that we must cancel the Memorandum. Many other left parties have been discussing the wider program of SYRIZA, and they have many ideas about this and that, but for us, the biggest thing was stay focused on the need to cancel the Memorandum.

This was the point where the pressure of the enemy was at its highest, and inside SYRIZA, there were voices calling for a “realistic” approach. They were not traitors. They were saying that SYRIZA must ourselves more space for maneuver—so let's say “no” to the Memorandum, not that we will cancel it. Let's say that we are against it in order to have time to go to Brussels and discuss the matter with Angela Merkel, and come back and decide.

But SYRIZA itself, until the end, stuck to this position. Three days before the election, the head of the coalition, Alexis Tsipras—not me—was speaking at a big rally of SYRIZA, and he said openly: “If SYRIZA wins the elections on Sunday, on Monday, the Memorandum is dead.” That was in all the newspapers the next day.

The second priority is that we would stop austerity. But comrades, we don't tell lies to the people. It's easy to say, in these circumstances, that salaries would be, in a single day, much better, because we want them to be better. The position of SYRIZA was that the day after taking office, we would take the minimum wage and the minimum pension back to the level that it was at before. And then gradually, we would try to extend these increases to all pensions and all salaries—to raise them to what existed before, and improve them.

You must understand that for two months, the program of SYRIZA was discussed on the television, on the radio and in the newspapers, from six in the morning until 12 at night. The question we heard over and over was: “Where will you find the money to do all this?” And the answer, comrades, is simple: We will find the money where the money is. So the third priority of SYRIZA was that we would tax—heavily tax—business profits and the rich.

Tied to this were several important points. First, nationalization of the banks—and that's not only in order to find the money. This is also the only way to protect society, because the banks become very big and very dangerous. All these new financial products they have introduced, like credit default swaps and the like, mean that on the basis of one euro of debt, the banks are building up much larger amounts of debt. At the end of the day, no one knows what is happening.

This whole party must stop with a nationalization of the banks, we said—under public, democratic, workers' control.

It wasn't by chance or because it was a lower priority that workers' control was the third on this list. We must, at this moment, face the reality that, in the banks, after 20 years of neoliberal policy, the unions have been destroyed. So you have to create the force to impose workers' control. Workers' control cannot come as a law issued by the government. The reality is that you must organize the workers to take workers' control.

The other point tied to SYRIZA's priority is that exactly the same nationalization under public, democratic, workers' control was promised in all the big public enterprises that have been privatized or in danger of privatization.

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I WANT to say a few words about two very crucial subjects in Greece.

One is about Greece's debt. Inside SYRIZA, there was a big discussion about this question. Members of DEA—and not only DEA, but many others, including comrades from Synaspismos—supported the position that we must say we will immediately cancel the debt. At the end of this discussion, we came to an honest compromise.

The compromise was the following: The first step of a government of the left must be to control the debt. The second step is to cancel all parts of the debt that are illegal or the product of financial speculation—and our estimation was that this will be the biggest part of the overall debt. And for the rest of the debt, we must demand a memorandum with conditions about the payment—and if the creditors don't agree to this memorandum, then we would go to the unilateral halt of any payments to the creditors. This position was a little bit flexible, but it was a compromise to keep our huge political current together.

The next question is about the euro. I talked before about the fears that people have in Greece about a disorderly bankruptcy and return to the drachma. Our position was that we would not support an exit from the euro by our own initiative. That's the first point. The second point was that we wouldn't accept any sacrifices for the euro. And the third point is that we support a European fight to stop austerity by every initiative taken by the left and the working class movement in Europe.

If you look at this all together, you can say, as some left-wing organizations in Greece and elsewhere did, that it's "left reformism." But this is an abstraction. In my point of view, under the circumstances that exist in Greece today, this is a transitional program.

I want to focus on this for emphasis. What is a transitional program? Between revolutionary left organizations, there is often a competition to propose something more advanced toward socialism as part of a transitional program. But that's not a transition. If such demands belonged in a transitional program, then I have the solution: All power to the soviets. And I'm sure that maybe someone else would find a more radical solution.

A transitional program means that you are starting from the existing reality—that you have demands which have a consensus among an important part of the population that is ready to fight for those demands. And through the experience of the fight, those people can go further—to more advanced demands and, at the same time, to bigger confrontations with the real enemies.

This was an important part of a statement made by the Fourth International to their section in Greece, which is part of ANTARSYA. The statement of the Fourth International was that you should support SYRIZA, but it importantly focused on the question of SYRIZA's demands being transitional, which is exactly what I have tried to describe.

My last point is about other left organizations.

There is a general belief that the Communist Party of Greece is to the left of SYRIZA. This is not the truth. The truth is that the Communist Party has important organized forces inside the workers movement in the private sector. But the truth is also that the Communist Party of Greece is something like the Communist Party of France in the early 1960s: a hard Stalinist party, a hard

reformist party, and a very conservative party.

I will give you two examples of this third statement—about how conservative the Communist Party is.

In 2008, we had the revolt of the youth in Greece against the killing of a young student by police in Athens. For a month, every night, the banks were burning in Athens—and each day, peaceful demonstrations were defending the protests at night. From early on, the Communist Party first accused SYRIZA of protecting the Black Bloc—and then they accused the police of not intervening on time to stop the fires.

The second example was in this election. In this election, the Communist Party was saying to the people that we cannot win—that it's impossible to have a government of the left, it's impossible to cancel the memorandum. That SYRIZA was telling lies, and don't trust them.

On May 6, the Communist Party won something near 8 percent of the vote. After that, the party decided its appeal for the June election would be to tell the working class to change their vote from SYRIZA—to tell them: "You are irresponsible, you have voted for SYRIZA, change your vote and support the party." "Change your vote" was the only slogan of the Communist Party to become reality—because they lost half of their power. They now have only 4 percent of the seats in parliament.

This was a punishment of the working class for the Communist Party, and there are many developments inside the party. We will see whether this creates change because the apparatus of the Communist Party has the expertise to deal with an internal situation. They are now kicking people out.

The last thing to say is about ANTARSYA. These comrades have made a sectarian mistake that is absolutely obvious. After the election on May 6, SYRIZA made a very generous proposition: to stand with us in a common electoral front in the elections. We guaranteed to them their visibility, their absolute independence and three seats in the parliament, which was exactly what they could get with the votes that they had on May 6 if there was no minimum percentage for parties entering parliament. They refused.

On June 17, out of every four voters that they had on May 6, they lost three. This was also punishment.

So this is the situation in Greece, comrades—and in this situation, we are trying to build today.

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P.S.

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* Transcription by Leela Yellesetty and Corey Larson.