

Greece: Syriza must not become a pro-Memorandum party - “If this transformation wins out, we will witness the end of Syriza”

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In the CC on July 30, based on a Stalinist tradition, members of the Left Platform were accused of being “a party within a party.” Turning this accusation around, the “closed circle” in SYRIZA to which the author refers in this article is constituted by, in reality, the circle of top government offices — A l’encontre editors

Presentation

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras finalized an agreement on an 86 billion euro bailout deal with the Eurogroup on August 14, after forcing through a vote in the Greek parliament on the final commitment of lawmakers. Tsipras pressed for the vote in defiance of a call by the left wing of SYRIZA for a special congress to return the radical left party to its founding principles of opposing austerity.

The new bailout constitutes a third Memorandum—the term used to refer to packages of harsh austerity measures required by European governments and international financial institutions as a condition of providing aid to keep the financial system afloat. After an intense all-night debate, more than one-quarter of SYRIZA members of parliament voted “no” or abstained, as they have twice before. All of the measures connected to Tsipras’ agreement negotiated in mid-July have passed with the support of pro-austerity parties, like the center-right New Democracy and center-left PASOK and Potami.

The final vote comes ahead of a party congress expected in September, where the left wing of SYRIZA, organized in the Left Platform, intends to fight for a new direction. At a Central Committee meeting on July 30, Tsipras launched an offensive against members of parliament who opposed his agreement with the lenders, with the aim of marginalizing the Left Platform and neutralizing the center-left of SYRIZA, better known as the Group of 53. After threatening to call a referendum of party members, Tsipras defeated a call by the left for an immediate congress, before the vote in parliament.

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The left's challenge in Syriza

THE CHANGING situation in SYRIZA will be determined by the following questions.

1. Solidarity [against slanderous attacks]. During these last few days, it has become clear that there is a political/media campaign directed against those SYRIZA leaders who, in one way or another, have demonstrated their disagreement with the agreement to accept a third Memorandum [signed on June 13 between the Tsipras government and the Eurogroup]. We refer here to Panagiotis Lafazanis [former Minister of Reproductive Reconstruction, Environment and Energy], Nadia Valavani [Vice Minister of Finance, who resigned after the agreement], Zoe Kostantopoulou [Speaker of Parliament] and Yanis Varoufakis [former Minister of Finance].

We must point out that, as a party, SYRIZA has had nothing to do with these immoral attacks. We demand that the party use all its power and influence to put an end to this situation. The members of the SYRIZA leadership must not forget what happened to PASOK in 1981. [In 1981, Andreas Papandreou won elections over the conservative New Democracy party leader Georgios Rallis; at that time, it was said that Greece had its “first socialist government.”] They should remember that during that era, similar procedures were used (including complicity between sectors of the party itself and the media and the state’s Secret Services) against the most radical leaders within PASOK. We cannot allow that same process to repeat itself within SYRIZA [referring here to the smear campaign against the radical sections of SYRIZA emanating from the governmental circle of the party].

2. A clear evaluation of the agreement. Many comrades ask that we avoid, simultaneously, a judgment that presents the agreement in either an overly rosy or exceedingly grim light. But neither of these characterizations makes any sense. What we need is a politically clear evaluation.

The agreement ratifies a very harsh Memorandum. A Memorandum stocked with a turbo-powered TAIPED [the fund set up to manage privatizations], one which places [the running of the government, the ministries, etc.] under hyper-vigilance, and one which establishes a powerful system of automatic cuts if budget targets are not met, including serious anti-labor “reforms.” We are dealing with a Memorandum that Samaras himself was unable to impose—not even the grand coalition government between Samaras (New Democracy) and Venizelos (PASOK) was able to achieve this.

The creditors and the Green ruling class have put this Memorandum into SYRIZA’s hands to take advantage of its influence within the working and popular classes in order to push through the counter-reforms. At the same time, these forces aim to break down the working-class forces that have gathered around SYRIZA throughout the huge anti-Memorandum struggles (2010-11), which they see as a threat.

On this occasion, the eurozone has relied on its international experience, including a long list of countries where the neoliberal counter-reforms have been imposed by social democratic governments. Once forced through, neoliberal violence speeds up without any brakes, and the social democratic parties, thereby profoundly transformed, are integrated into a new cycle of power of the pan-European right.

3. Is there an alternative? It's wrong to simply pose the question of whether or not Alexis Tsipras had any alternative in the dramatic early morning hours of July 13. Instead, it is necessary to take in the account what transpired during the previous six months since the electoral victory on January 25.

As a member of the Left Platform, I agree with all the proposals that were made over the last months to address the need for a conflict-rupture with the eurozone and the euro currency. But for the moment, I will not respond to talk about the so-called "pro-drachma left" [one of the formulas that the media use to characterize SYRIZA's left wing], nor will I repeat the arguments that have to do with the need for a Plan B. Instead, I would like to focus on what all of this has to do with the abandonment of SYRIZA's Plan A [the Thessaloniki program announced by Tsipras a year ago in September, which constituted a series of "first steps" to be taken by a new left government to begin to reverse austerity].

SYRIZA's founding congress in 2013 defined the plan adopted by the majority. This consisted of the following elements: Reforms in favor of the working and popular classes [defined as a primary budget surplus, that is to say, prior to making debt payments], which would itself imply adopting "unilateral decisions" that would lead to the formation of a strong social alliance of the left around the government; The financing of this program to be carried out with resources derived from not paying the debt (with an eye toward canceling a large part of it); All of this to be accompanied by a radical fiscal reform based on the forceful controls over capital and accumulated wealth, the struggle against fraud and tax evasion by the capitalist class, as well as the cancelation of privatizations.

The relationship between this program and "globalization" [in a European context] would be expressed as follows: "No sacrifices for the euro." This perspective would leave open the question of "negotiation," but it would function as a radical politics of confrontation and a turning point within the Greece, leaving open the possibility of a rupture with the leadership of the eurozone when faced with the choice of defending the population or sticking with the euro.

At this time, we don't know if this policy which was approved by the congress was correct or not; we don't know what would constitute an "alternative" to Merkel and Schäuble. And this is for one simple reason: because this policy was abandoned the day after the electoral victory, because it was annulled by "a closed circle within the heart of the party,"* which unilaterally decided, without approval from the any representative party body [either the Central Committee or a Congress], to dedicate itself exclusively to negotiations with the creditors based on a tactic of closing ranks when confronting the "institutions" [the European Central Bank (ECB), European Union, International Monetary Fund (IMF)].

All this with the hopes placed on achieving an honorable compromise, which would have to be accepted in order to remain "at all costs within the Eurozone." A policy which, from the first step taken on February 20 [the first agreement with the Troika which included making debt service payments], led to total disaster on the night of July 12 and 13 in Brussels.

4. What was happening in the meantime? Many comrades will say that we pushed the fight with the creditors to its maximum limits.

They want to make us believe that we stopped paying the debt [because one partial payment of 1.5 billion euros was not made to the IMF in June]. But this is not serious. A suspension of debt payments must have as its goal the preservation of financial resources in order to satisfy social needs, and not for reimbursing the loan sharks. This has nothing to do with paying the creditors even down to the last euro penny and, after, being obliged to suspend further reimbursements for

lack of resources.

They also say that we have placed controls on capital. But this isn't serious either. The imposition of the 60-euro-per-day cap on withdrawals did nothing to affect capital—rather, it hit ordinary people's savings; big capital had already had enough time to take flight without any problems. This measure in no way constituted any management or control over capital because capital does not make use of ATMs—rather, it operates through the four main banks which had already organized capital flight.

SYRIZA Deputy Prime Minister Yannis Dragasakis confirms that draining bank deposits constituted a high-power weapon in the creditors' hands. Can we really believe what he says? What was responsible for the changes in [directors of] the banks? For the "peaceful coexistence" between the government and the bankers over the last six months? Who was responsible for warning the party and the government about the massive capital flight being carried about by the four more important "respectable" banks?

Have we done anything against the smuggling network? Haven't we, during this whole period, left control over betting on horse races and managing slot machines in the hands of OPAP [the private company which controls the lottery which was privatized in 2013].

5. Have we abandoned the left's ideas? I agree with those [referring to the center-left faction of SYRIZA, better known as the Group of 53 Plus, who, despite their reservations about the agreement, have aligned themselves with the government] who point out that the new Memorandum puts us in danger of abandoning the left's ideas and policies.

But who, in truth, is seeking an exit for the grave situation we are heading into? There is a solution within in reach: reject, even at this late date, the agreement; vote in favor of a clear agenda and for a policy defined by the left; demand a clear mandate based on a political alternative [referring to the discussion in the Central Committee which left a political discussion of the Memorandum to the side].

Speaking of this group, [referring to the Group of 53 Plus who, in their majority, were among the 109 members of the Central Committee who signed a statement on July 15 opposing the agreement with the institutions and demanding an emergency meeting of the CC], there is a permanent dialogue which is being conducted in an honest and convincing manner. What this implies for SYRIZA is that there should be an open discussion and that any decision adopted should be under the control of the representative organs of the party.

6. The proposal for a party congress in September. Many comrades support the proposal for a congress in September, in this way trying to steer clear of any "adventures" or avoid the risk of a split.

In this way, a vacuum of political criticism is opening up. In effect, the problem has to do with what is going to happen between now [the Central Committee meeting on July 30] and the end of September. That is to say, what will happen during this interval in which the (radical) left will be presented with the third Memorandum for approval and then put into place? The party and its committees will be forced into not being able to state their opinion about the most important question of the day; meanwhile, the "closed circle in the heart of the party" and the government will have its hands freed to adopt the austerity Memorandum.

This is why the Left Platform proposes convening a "Permanent Congress" starting immediately [the "Permanent Congress" would be based on delegates from the preceding party congress, which approved SYRIZA's program, would be able to make their voices heard instead of only those

delegates who have been “selected” to approve the government’s decisions] or, at a minimum, before the Memorandum (and all its attached articles) is presented to the parliament for approval. [The government intended to propose final approval of the Memorandum on August 18, a mere two days before the deadline when Athens must repay 3.2 billion euros to the ECB.]

7. Commitments to the movement. Besides being members of the party, we are members of social organizations, such as unions. In these organizations, we have the obligation to encourage the struggle, the social resistance against the measures that will flow from the third Memorandum. We must use the usual means: strikes, demonstrations, occupations, etc. Objectively, these struggles will turn against the government supported by SYRIZA. Individually and collectively, if we approve the new memorandum, we will find ourselves confronted with a difficult situation.

Whoever tries to clamp down on these struggles, whoever proposes that the self-censuring of SYRIZA members, will merely serve as a mechanism for those forces pressuring SYRIZA into becoming a pro-Memorandum party.

If this transformation wins out, we will witness the end of SYRIZA [as a party-coalition of the radical left].

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2015/08/17/the-lefts-challenge-in-syriza>

* Translated from French and Spanish versions in A l’encontre and Viento Sur by Todd Chretien.