

Greece: From September 20 Elections to the Eve of February 4, 2016 General Strike

Monday 29 February 2016, by [NTAVANELLOS \(DAVANELLOS\) Antonis](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2016).

The general strike in Greece on February 4 and an even broader social mobilization against austerity that began before the strike and continued after it is the sign of a new period emerging in Greece since the capitulation last July of the SYRIZA government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to the blackmail demands in the third Memorandum, a package of harsh austerity measures. Tsipras later drove out the left wing of SYRIZA—now the core of a new electoral front called Popular Unity (PU)—and called snap elections that his party was able to win by keeping the left at a disadvantage.

Here, we publish two recent analyses by European socialists that appeared together at the A l'encontre website. This one, written on the eve of the general strike, is by Antonis Davanellos, a leading Greek socialist, member of the Internationalist Workers Left, which co-founded SYRIZA, and now a prominent figure in Popular Unity.

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During the September 20, 2015 elections, Tsipras' general staff—with the generous support of the creditors and national ruling classes, who were in dire need of a “leader”—saw their dreams come true: the exclusion of the PU from parliament; the electoral survival of ANEL (the Independent Greeks, a party that acts as SYRIZA's junior partner in government); the entry into parliament of various “useful idiots” such as TV personality Vassilis Leventis and his Union of Centrists; the fragmentation of social anger against the third Memorandum; and the near-extinction of the socio-political dynamic created by the 62 percent “no” vote in the July 5, 2015 referendum, which translated into a high level of abstention on September 2.

At that time, many analysts considered Tsipras to be a “hegemon” (a sort of dominant sovereign) and SYRIZA transformed into a party of the future for the long term. There were only a few of us who insisted—including, first and foremost, and to its credit, the leadership of PU—on several elements of instability in the overall situation:

1. That the elections of September 20 were a usurpation, made possible by one key element: The concrete measures of the third Memorandum had not been defined at the time of the elections, so their impact could not be evaluated by those going to the polls.
2. That the promise made by Tsipras during the campaign for a program of parallel management to be carried out the SYRIZA-ANEL government—to counteract the effects of the Memorandum—amplified the public's disorientation, along with its illusions, especially owing to the terrible collapse in living conditions.

3. That the public's aversion toward New Democracy worked in favor of the Maximos Mansion (the official seat of the Prime Minister).

However, it was clear that this context was going to change over the coming months, and we could expect a new wave of social discontent as soon as the real measures required by the July 13 agreement, signed in Brussels by Tsipras and Euclide Tsakalotos, the current Finance Minister, took effect. Among the most important of these is the huge cuts in pensions.

Based on this, we believed that we were entering a period that would be marked by political instability. We focused on this potential and began to plan our political intervention with an orientation toward a perspective of large-scale social and political struggles that would not be long in coming. This perspective ran counter to the majority of the political representatives to the left of SYRIZA.

Less than five months later, in February, this assessment has been confirmed to a degree and with a speed which surpassed even our expectations.

Tsipras and his general staff find themselves faced with the serious danger of an uncontrollable crisis, a veritable collapse. There is an open debate about the "expansion" of the parliamentary bloc which supports the SYRIZA government to include Leventis' Union of Centrists, To Potami (a centrist party, meaning "to the River" in Greek), and perhaps PASOK. This debate even extends to the potential to integrate the conservatives of New Democracy in some sort of national unity government formula or even the potential for new elections (the fourth in twelve months!), all demonstrating the depth of the instability.

As Zoe Konstantapoulou (the ex-president of the parliament under the first SYRIZA government) has reminded us, Tsipras himself defended measures like the Social Security cuts put forward by Giorios Katrougkalos (Minister of Labor, Social Insurance, and Social Solidarity), which could not have been imposed except under a government of national unity or a dictatorship.

A party like SYRIZA, despite its neoliberal transformation, cannot expect silence in carrying out such reactionary restrictions of democratic and social rights—especially not, speaking concretely, Social Security. These measures can only sharpen the conflicts between those who remain inside SYRIZA, including clashes between municipal, regional and national elected officials.

At the root of the governmental crisis lies the sudden rise of a mass movement for the defense of Social Security. Recent admirers of the report on the impact of austerity by Tassos Giannitsis (the head of Hellenic Petroleum from December 2009 to November 2011, and then Interior Minister in the so-called technocratic government of Lucas Papademos from November 11, 2011 to May 18, 2012) should not forget his precipitous fall, nor that of Kostas Simitis, who retired (including from his post as a national deputy for the port of Piraeus) after having been, until now, the all-powerful champion of "modernization."

Widespread participation in the demonstrations by members of the liberal professions (lawyers, researchers, scientists, doctors, etc.) and workers from the public sector, ports, airports, banks, courts and schools is expected for the February 3 mobilization—as well as massive road blocks organized by farmers, who joined the struggle at the beginning of January. This constitutes a particularly dangerous set of circumstances for the government; it is within the realm of possibility that the movement in defense of Social Security could win, and the Katrougkalos plan could be defeated.

The system's apologists are putting forward "analyses" that underestimate the importance of these

mobilizations. The concept of “social automatism”—that is, a supposed disconnection between social movements and their political repercussions or effects—is reliving its glory days, this time propagated by currents of the “left.”

They tell us that subcontracted or independent workers, public employees and farmers do not constitute homogenous groups and, therefore, they will fall victim to a kind of automatic fragmentation from uncontrollable centripetal forces.

Of course, we’ve always known that there are rich lawyers, professionals and farmers. We also know that there are political and trade union leaders who called for a “yes” vote on July 5, 2015, and who today accept the terms of the third Memorandum. However, even this group feels compelled to participate in the demonstrations, if only to search for the possibility of coming to some sort of agreement with Katrougkalos in order to reduce the anger among the rank and file of their own organizations.

These conflicts give rise to new tasks for the radical left, a left which must undercut the influence of these concessionary leaderships, who have been coopted by power in many different ways. Popular Unity is working to move in this direction. But this dynamic does not change in the least our assessment that the mobilizations of the so-called independent workers and the farmers are of politically decisive importance. In any real movement of the masses, there is no such thing as chemical purity.

A second argument put forward by the system’s apologists has to do with the supposed non-participation of workers, especially unionized workers. These lines are being written just before the February 4 general strike, and we do not yet know the scale of the response the workers will give to these desiccated cadavers masquerading as analysts. But the political atmosphere leading up to the strike is clear: the convergence of workers, farmers, liberal professionals, and public employees in the streets will raise the pressure to a level that bears all the signs of becoming a nightmare for the government.

Clearly, no one has the right to underestimate the importance of previous rounds of working-class resistance, even if they were of lesser magnitudes. As it happened, early efforts taken by the public employee ADEDY union, as well as unions from other sectors, opened the way, the path they forged has been transformed into a broad boulevard. We should focus all our attention on the power of the rank-and-file movement.

Under these conditions, the government is facing an additional problem. The creditors—who have their own problems stemming from a prolonged international crisis—refuse to provide any “relief.” The directives coming from Europe demand only that the austerity program be applied; in short, they demand the Greek government extends even more political support to the Europeans.

However, this time, it seems improbable that the Europeans will look kindly on any new governmental tactics (such as calling new elections) because these carry with them the risk of reversing the Memorandum’s application, while they may increase destabilizing factors beyond the Greek borders.

Tsipras admits that he is seeking a “national consensus.” The scenario of enlarging the government, with him keeping his post as prime minister, implies finding allies besides Leventis, To Potami and PASOK, who all may agree to play their roles, but this would hardly create an image of a significantly broadened political base.

Yet the potential for a real government of national unity, including New Democracy’s participation,

also poses the question of dispensing with the symbolic role that Tsipras himself has played for a whole period. And are there any forces inside SYRIZA itself who might consent to this sort of possibility, and offer themselves as at least a partial alternative to Tsipras?

This impasse brings us back, once again, to the potential for new elections. In the past, Tsipras reproached the left of his own party for trying to “escape.” This was in reference to debates and confrontations within SYRIZA: First, in relation to some left-wing SYRIZA MPs refusing to vote for the July 13, 2015 agreement; and, second, with respect to the date and technicalities of the September elections.

Now it turns out that he will likely need elections to escape from his shameful collapse. But this time, this tactic will not be easy: he can neither bank on a consensus among the creditors, nor count on cooperation from the state apparatus, nor rely on support from Greek elites. Moreover, a SYRIZA victory in new elections is far from guaranteed.

Conditions are changing rapidly. In this context, the radical left must intervene and participate with all its forces so that this round of struggles may win and defeat the counter reform. Therein lies the hope of overturning the third Memorandum and rendering the July 13 Brussels agreement null and void. This entails defending all social rights, those of the working class in a broad sense as well, as those of its allies (from farmers to sections of the middle classes), so that the bill for the crisis can be passed on to the rulers and the rich who caused it in the first place.

Antonis Davanellos

P.S.

* “From September 20 to February 4”. :

<http://socialistworker.org/2016/02/29/whats-after-the-general-strike>

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