



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3883>

Greece

Syriza's victory seen by a dockworker, union leader from the Port of Piraeus

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV481 - February 2015 -

Publication date: Saturday 21 February 2015

Description:

Following the collapse of the Greek economy, the memorandum with the troika included a provision to sell off profitable state-owned companies to pay back loans to foreign lenders, resulting in the partial privatization of the Port of Piraeus, Greece's largest port, where Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO now holds the concession for two container terminals. Since that time, dockworkers have waged a militant and sustained struggle, with strong local alliances in Piraeus and international support from dockworkers around Europe, to return the port to full public ownership and improve the poor working conditions at the privatized COSCO terminals.

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Gior-gos Gogos is a Greek dock-worker and union leader from the Port of Piraeus. A member of SYRIZA, he is active at the regional and union levels of the party and is engaged in local organizing efforts in Piraeus, the large urban industrial area surrounding the port outside of Athens. Katy Fox-Hodess is a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley writing her dissertation on international solidarity among dockworkers' unions. She spoke with Gogos on January 31 following the recent election in Greece

Katy Fox-Hodess: How have people in your community reacted to the election results?

Gior-gos Gogos: Generally, it was accepted with great enthusiasm by many people, not only by those who voted for SYRIZA but other people who traditionally belonged to other parties and couldn't escape from those commitments. Everybody I think was saying, ok, let's see what this new route is like and we have to try, somehow, a new way of approaching the whole problem.

K: When you say other parties, you mean PASOK and the Communist Party?

G: PASOK and New Democracy, mostly. From the Communist Party, anyway, I don't have many acquaintances, but I think that people who don't belong to the structure of the party, who are not members of the party, accept this election result with relief. In the beginning, we can say there was a negative reaction, they were questioning the possibility of co-governing with ANEL, the Independent Greeks, that is actually a populist right-wing party, though all of their discourse is actually quite anti-Troika, anti-memorandum. But I think after the formation of the new government, the new elected government, many people realize that there is going to have to be cooperation within the government. The new government has been quite coherent and we have the first announcements from several ministers confirming to the people that the main guidelines of the pre-election program are going to be implemented at once.

K: What has the reaction been in the port?

G: In the port, we were really happy, especially after hearing the first announcements by the new Minister of Maritime Affairs. He reconfirmed that the privatization process of all ports, but especially the Port of Piraeus and the Port of Thessaloniki, will stop.

K: One of the first announcements SYRIZA made after the election was about stopping the privatization of the ports. Why do you think SYRIZA has made this such a priority and why is it important to fight for public ports?

G: You know we are say-ing in the port that every-one who was against the dock-work-ers in Piraeus port lost power, lost the gov-ern-ment, they were elim-i-nated, so don't fight against us. Ok, so this is a very macho expla-na-tion, it's not polit-i-cal. For SYRIZA, pri-va-ti-za-tion in gen-eral is some-thing that's not accept-able. The pri-va-ti-za-tion that was going on very, very quickly was the pri-va-ti-za-tion of the ports, and espe-cially the Port of Piraeus. So I think that it was sym-bolic, and at the same time, an impor-tant mes-sage, that we're not going to pri-va-tize. And of course, it's very impor-tant that Piraeus port work-ers and dock-work-ers have shown their deter-mi-na-tion, their devo-tion to defend the pub-lic port.

First of all, it's a strate-gic point for a coun-try such as Greece, not only because of the many islands that con-nect the peo-ple liv-ing there and trav-el-ing there, not only because it's the main gate of ingo-ing and out-go-ing cargo and goods. It's also because when a state-owned com-pany passes to pri-vate investors, the pri-vate investors care only for their prof-its and noth-ing else. So the people's trans-porta-tion needs will not be served. Apart from this, it affects the soci-ety and the econ-omy in gen-eral. It was and it will be prof-itable. It didn't have losses in any year over the past fifty years. And a gov-ern-ment like SYRIZA needs prof-itable pub-lic enti-ties so as to redis-trib-ute the pub-lic wealth. Apart from this, our jobs would be lost, our labor rights and the orga-ni-za-tion of our job would be chal-lenged and in dan-ger, and it's affect-ing our fam-i-lies, so we are fight-ing also for our jobs and for our children.

K: Are you opti-mistic that SYRIZA will be suc-cess-ful in this process of con-fronting COSCO and the troika and stop-ping the process of port privatizations?

G: SYRIZA will be strong only if they will remain com-mit-ted to the pre-elections program. In addi-tion to this, they need the sup-port of the peo-ple and soci-ety. For exam-ple, of course we are sure that they are going to have pres-sure from abroad, from China and from the Euro-pean Union and from the troika and from mem-ber states in Europe. But all this pres-sure will be less effec-tive if peo-ple stand with the deci-sions of the gov-ern-ment. One of the first things that Alexis Tsipras said yesterday to [Eurogroup Chair] Dijs-sel-bloem was that he wants to do things differently than the peo-ple who were in power before him. He said he wants to fol-low the com-mit-ments that he made to the peo-ple. It's impor-tant to hear that from a leader, the Prime Min-is-ter, to say that he will fol-low the pro-gram that he showed to the peo-ple and was voted for. This way, they can-not reverse their plans or in case they have to reverse their plans, they will have to ask for the opin-ion of the peo-ple and the soci-ety first.

I have trust in my com-rades in SYRIZA. And I have trust not only that they will be account-able but that they will fol-low what they have been say-ing. I have trust that they have received the mes-sage from soci-ety, which says go do what you have told us you will do. Of course, we know that as a union, we have our auton-omy, we are not going to fol-low some-thing that a mem-ber of SYRIZA says or a min-is-ter of SYRIZA says - we have a very healthy coop-er-a-tion and an hon-est one.

K: Is it impor-tant for the union and for the coali-tion in Piraeus to con-tinue to orga-nize and be mobi-lized to pro-vide pres-sure from below for SYRIZA to keep its promises?

G: Of course. Orga-ni-za-tion and mobi-liza-tion of the union in gen-eral, and espe-cially in a sec-tor like ours, is a neces-sity and a pre-con-di-tion for any-thing you want to do at any time. No mat-ter which party's in power, no mat-ter what the deci-sions are. Until now, all the deci-sions have been neg-a-tive for the unions - it's the first time in Greece we face some-thing pro-labor, anti-privatization and so on. But we still want to be mobi-lized. We don't want peo-ple to remain on their couches, but instead we want to be on alert in order to pro-mote our demands so that they will not dis-ap-point us. And we want to pro-mote our demands and the deci-sions of the gov-ern-ment that the European Union or other coun-tries do not accept and are pres-sur-ing the Greek government to back down on. And already we have started to have this dis-cus-sion among our-selves. Every-body was happy all this week, it was the first time we were laugh-ing after the announce-ment of the new gov-ern-ment, but at the same time, or the next day, we were start-ing to talk about it, to say, now we have a gov-ern-ment that says no to pri-va-ti-za-tion, but in case

they are pres-sured by Europe to sac-ri-fice the ports, what are we going to do? We're going to stand out-side of the door of the Maritime Affairs Min-istry and our port, and we will con-tinue our fight.

K: The same day that SYRIZA announced it would stop the port pri-va-ti-za-tion process, they also announced that they would rehire the clean-ers from the Min-istry of Finance and thou-sands of peo-ple who were ille-gally fired from the pub-lic sec-tor. What is the sig-nif-i-cance of pri-or-i-tiz-ing these decisions?

G: It's very sym-bolic, first of all, because this group of women were very mil-i-tant, very active, and very much present in every strug-gle tak-ing place in Athens. So it's very sym-bolic and a very good exam-ple, not in all senses because they made certain mis-takes in my opin-ion, and we have some oth-ers who can say a lot of things, but they still remain like heroes. But I don't like to use the word hero because you put a hero over there and you for-get him and you are doing bull-shit on the other side. So they're peo-ple like us, they were women like us and they were very devoted to their strug-gle. So it's very impor-tant for SYRIZA to sup-port them and to solve their prob-lem. It encour-ages other unions to be this devoted.

K: What is the sig-nif-i-cance of the elec-tion for work-ers and unions in Greece in general?

G: It's the high-est moment of democ-racy. This is a moment in which all of us are called to choose who is going to rep-re-sent us and sup-port and defend our rights and our posi-tions. We are not afraid of elec-tions. On the con-trary, I think Greek peo-ple should be asked more fre-quently. For exam-ple, it is con-sti-tu-tion-ally per-mis-si-ble to have ref-er-en-dums, so I think the new gov-ern-ment will use this process and will mobilize peo-ple in this way to be par-tic-i-pants and not an audi-ence. This is impor-tant. It needs time. It's not a mat-ter that will change in one or two or five years. But if a left gov-ern-ment can remain pow-er-ful for more than five years, for two gov-ern-men-tal cycles, and build strong foun-da-tions, it will change the our men-tal-ity as cit-i-zens. We believe in this because as a trade union, we use elec-tions fre-quently, we have collec-tive deci-sion mak-ing processes.

K: Do you believe SYRIZA will pri-or-i-tize revers-ing the anti-labor leg-is-la-tion of the last gov-ern-ment, which tar-geted col-lec-tive bar-gain-ing and unions?

G: It's one of the first things they say they are going to cure. They are going to reverse all of these neg-a-tive laws which pre-vent col-lec-tive bar-gain-ing and return all the laws that were pro-tec-tive to the less pow-er-ful part of the mar-ket, which is labor and not the employ-ers. It's a com-mit-ment and I think it's one of the first laws they are going to reverse.

K: What is your opin-ion on the alliance between SYRIZA and ANEL?

G: In the begin-ning, I was quite skep-ti-cal. But the major-ity of 149 MP's gives them the oppor-tu-nity to have a role in this gov-ern-ment. Greek soci-ety in gen-eral is not so pro-gres-sive. A big per-cent-age of Greek soci-ety is quite con-ser-v-a-tive, not only in its way of think-ing, in its way of act-ing, but in its way of approach-ing sev-eral issues, for exam-ple, sex-ual ori-en-ta-tion or human rights con-cern-ing immi-grants. These are issues that many Greek peo-ple are not in favor of. They are quite con-ser-v-a-tive. The vast major-ity of Greek peo-ple are not so reli-gious, but quite attached to the tra-di-tion con-nected to the Ortho-dox church. The oath that the new Prime Min-is-ter, Tsipras, gave was polit-i-cal, with respect to the leader of the Greek church, say-ing that I'm going to give a polit-i-cal oath but also I want your good wishes for this gov-ern-ment to go on. It sends a mes-sage. So you need a con-ser-v-a-tive party that can sup-port you in this strug-gle, in the com-mon fight against the mem-o-ran-dum poli-cies, and after that, I think the Greek peo-ple will real-ize that rec-og-niz-ing, for exam-ple, the mar-riage between LGBT peo-ple, it's not cru-cial, you're not going to be affected, you're not going to be infected, it's a human right. So you are more pow-er-ful hav-ing a conservative party in this and hav-ing already some time, a year, six months in power, and

having shown that you believe in what you are saying and you fight for it and you want to implement it. It's important to have a conservative audience in such a government so as to transmit some ideas. It's more clever, let's say, to have them inside, and honest, in the sense that you can say to them, for example, ok guys, we have a problem with some thousands of kids that are born here in Greece, their parents were citizens of other countries and they have no citizenship, but they are Greeks, they are brought up here, they have been taught in Greek schools, they are our children's friends, so we should give them citizenship, they are Greek people.

K: So you are saying that having ANEL in the coalition forces SYRIZA to try to speak to and convince people on the right?

G: Yes, Yes. And I think it's the best vehicle to minimize conservatism in Greece. Maybe what I'm saying is too romantic and has no political explanation, but it's my personal impression. I've seen this in my union. Some conservative people have seen members of our union, left guys, who are committed and hard-working, and through their example, they are persuaded that no matter if you left wing or right wing, when somebody is fighting for something that is right, and if they trust you more and they are convinced but you voted for SYRIZA, it's ok. If you want to make bread, you put in flour and water and you mix it together and after that you have bread. This process I think will take place in the government and will be expanded to society.

K: Is there not a risk that SYRIZA will move to the right?

G: No, not from ANEL. I don't think there is this danger from ANEL being inside the government. If we will have this move, it will be from other agents outside of the government, more powerful players in this game, the state or big capitalists - the whole system, let's say. But not from ANEL.

K: What are the biggest challenges or pressures SYRIZA will face to push its agenda?

G: First of all, if we leave the case of the port and privatizations and all of that, this anti-privatization policy will be the vehicle for the troika to press us. For example, if you don't follow our program, we'll stop your liquidity. The first thing they have to do is address the debt crisis at the European level. It's not easy. There are several articles this week, for example, about how Prime Ministers Mariano Rajoy in Spain and Pedro Passos Coelho in Portugal, reject this proposal. They say it will be damaging for all of us and the markets will punish us, just like what Antonis Samaras, the former Prime Minister, would say, for example. But I think that if this cause is taken up by the people and the European social democratic parties that still have some significant part of left discourse in them, I think that more alliances and more allies will be found. This is the first thing. Because the debt is not only strangling us, it's also pressing more healthy economies. Germany itself has such problems. It's not obvious now, but sooner or later it will come. And on the other hand, for internal affairs, I think they should start giving signs that the citizens are the priority, not the companies. They should start, for example, as I said, by ameliorating labor laws, and also making changes in the health and education system, and making a serious effort to tax big wealth. These will be signs to society and to the poorest part of the society that something has changed, that they're not the same as the others, that the rich are not untouchable and the rest of us will not be fucked over once again.

K: Do you believe that the coalition with ANEL will last?

G: I don't know. It's a big question mark. I don't think that this form of government will last much time. I don't know if it's going to be one year or two years but I don't think it will last for four years. They are going to face serious challenges in the near future. I put a deadline, let's say, in the summer, when we're going to face the first serious problem in paying back some of the debt. If we don't have any alternative resources for paying this money, I think

we will have new elec-tions. So SYRIZA has until that time to show to the peo-ple what the direc-tion is, that it's dif-fer-ent than the pre-vi-ous gov-ern-ment, so they will reaf-firm, maybe with bet-ter results, the new government. Actu-ally, I wouldn't like to see this coali-tion last for four years. I would like to see the left party get more pow-er-ful through this coali-tion in order to have a light at the end of the tun-nel soon and to go to elec-tions again with a greater percentage for SYRIZA, so it has an absolute majority.

K: To sup-port SYRIZA, in gen-eral, what should work-ers and unions in Greece be doing?

G: They should be more active and respond to the calls for dia-logue. There is a com-mit-ment from SYRIZA's side that no deci-sion will be taken with-out a dia-logue between the gov-ern-ment and the affected or inter-ested par-ties. So first of all we have to be work-ing harder to have pro-pos-als, so as to have some-thing to say and not to sim-ply say no or yes with obe-di-ence, but to con-tinue to be crit-i-cal. On the other hand, we have to start processes, pro-ce-dures, and ini-tia-tives in order to real-ize we are not the only ones with a prob-lem, but next to us there are also peo-ple with more prob-lems or less prob-lems. This way we can have hor-i-zon-tal and ver-ti-cal rela-tions with other adja-cent institutions.

It's not dif-fi-cult for this to hap-pen, espe-cially in Piraeus, because we have the labor cen-ter. Unfor-tu-nately, the power rests with the the Com-mu-nist Party link in trade union-ism, and they're not so coop-er-a-tive. They not only have cer-tain struc-tures and dis-courses, but they fol-low cer-tain direc-tives from the party. And their inten-tion is to get more power for the party instead of devel-op-ing a more coher-ent pro-gram and becom-ing closer to pri-vate work-ers. I think we have a lot of work ahead of us if we want to be con-struc-tive and if we want to expand the idea of sol-i-dar-ity and co-action. I think the days of each sec-tor fight-ing on their own are over. It's not effec-tive anymore. And in case SYRIZA does not do well and loses power, a more con-ser-v-a-tive gov-ern-ment will cer-tainly come to power. So we need to make the most of this time, not only to change things for the bet-ter, but in case we have neg-a-tive results, to be more pre-pared to face the con-ser-v-a-tivism that will come for sure. But this is the pessimistic view. We have a more opti-mistic view, to be con-struc-tive, draw up propos-als, and make our self-criticism - why we didn't suc-ceed as trade unions before, what things have to be changed within the struc-tures and the processes to be more demo-c-ra-tic and less clien-telis-tic. We have a lot to do.

K: How is the rela-tion-ship between SYRIZA and the labor unions? Are there strong ties?

G: No, they don't have strong con-nec-tions because actu-ally within the trade union struc-tures, SYRIZA's per-cent-ages are the same as they were five years ago. So peo-ple from SYRIZA in trade unions are in the minor-ity. Although soci-ety has changed, due to clien-telism, per-sonal con-nec-tions, and all these rot-ten sys-tems, demo-c-ra-tic ways of breath-ing are not allowed. So SYRIZA in power is in a bet-ter posi-tion to put these processes in the front and cen-ter. But I don't know how big the resis-tance will be, espe-cially from the Com-mu-nist side. Because, unfor-tu-nately, the Com-mu-nist Party is part of this clien-telism and has espe-cially non-democratic ways of hold-ing power within the unions. I've heard ter-ri-ble sto-ries, and I know they're not just sto-ries, about how unions that belong to the Com-mu-nist party use very undemoc-ra-tic means to keep their power.

K: In other words, the prin-ci-ple prob-lem is the struc-ture of the unions - they are clien-telis-tic and not very demo-c-ra-tic - which makes it dif-fi-cult for SYRIZA to gain a foothold in the unions?

G: They were very close to the par-ties that were in power. SYRIZA must not fall into the trap of using their power in gov-ern-ment to sow the same seeds in this field. It must leave the trade unions alone to change themselves.

K: One crit-i-cism of SYRIZA is that the party is dom-i-nated by uni-ver-sity intel-lec-tu-als, not peo-ple from the union move-ment - do you share this view?

G: It is more or less true. But as I told you, the problem is that people in the unions who are members of SYRIZA are few in number. And to be honest, personally speaking, I don't promote myself in SYRIZA as a trade unionist and in my trade union as a member of SYRIZA. They are two different roles. I try to distinguish and behave according to where I am. Of course, between these two roles, the priority for me is to be a dockworker and to protect as much as I can the rights of my colleagues and my job. But apart from this, I need some political tools to make this happen. I think there will be fewer university guys and more trade unionists over time. But also I have to tell you that trade unionism in Greece is quite devalued.

K: There is a negative opinion of trade unions?

G: Yes, because of the very big connection between the parties of New Democracy and PASOK with the trade unions. I think I told you before that many presidents of the Confederation of Greek Workers, after the end of their term, became ministers, without explaining or having any process open to the people or open to the unions. It was just a very personal decision, passing from one role to the other. So all these behaviors created problems and people were leaving the unions. What we're trying to do in our union is to fight this. Of course we have few things in common with such behaviors. On the contrary, we have very open approaches, we try to mobilize people, we try to involve new members and young members in decision making in the union, so while we might not be one of the best, I think we have a very good approach to this. And we think that unionism is a tool to have common demands and to fight for our common demands. It should not be seen as only a step for one person to become more powerful or more dominant. Whoever holds these positions has to serve for the good of everybody, not to serve their personal interests.

K: The Piraeus B electoral district near the port had among the strongest support for SYRIZA in the elections in 2012 and in 2015. Why has there been such strong support there?

G: Generally, in the poorest areas, SYRIZA got the biggest percentages. The vote was quite class oriented. In Piraeus, and in the wider area of Piraeus, I think the seriousness of the approach of SYRIZA, the sincere intervention, you know, all the activities of the last three years, have awarded SYRIZA with this percentage of the vote.

K: You have been very active in organizing with the party in Piraeus. What kinds of activities has SYRIZA been involved in there?

G: Solidarity for All in Piraeus, an organization supported mainly by SYRIZA, serves daily meals. There are also the "solidarity lessons", free classes for students who cannot afford to have private lessons for the university exams, as well as social pharmacies and social doctors, checking people for free and prescribing and so on. These are immediate actions for the society done without checking people's status, unlike Golden Dawn. Every vulnerable person is accepted. It's a healthy intervention in society. Of course we are trying to tell people that they should mobilize and collectively demand their rights. But it's not to make them be a member of SYRIZA or to work for SYRIZA and so on.

There is also a coordinating body of anti-fascists in Piraeus and we are in it. We don't have our own campaigns. We try to support the common struggles, the anti-fascist struggles. On the contrary, the Communist Party is unfortunately out of this, with their own intervention, which is very low, I have to tell you. They don't make frequent protests, and so on, although they were a target and they are still a target of fascists. But they are very afraid to get involved in a common struggle. On the other hand, we have very good relations with people from ANTARSYA, especially in anti-fascist struggles, despite our differences. I don't think there is an anti-fascist movement or manifestation, in Piraeus at least, that we do not participate in.

K: sup-port for Golden Dawn is less than it was one, two, or three years ago. Why do you think this is?

G: In my opin-ion, they should be even less pow-er-ful, they should lose more than 5% of the per-cent-age. Unfor-tu-nately, they kept 6.5% or some-thing like this. It's a big per-cent-age if you con-sider that their lead-er-ship is in prison, that they don't have the finan-cial resources they used to have, and, most impor-tantly, that it is now pub-licly well-known that they are engaged in crim-i-nal activ-i-ties. So it's an unfor-tu-nate result and it's quite painful to have 6,000 or so of your neigh-bors vote for Golden Dawn. I expect from SYRIZA first of all to put them on trial, to give them a fair trial, and at the same time, from the per-spec-tive of being in gov-ern-ment, to pro-mote anti-fascism and anti-racism so as to start chang-ing the men-tal-ity of those peo-ple who are now vot-ing for Golden Dawn, to change their ori-en-ta-tion and to be clear with soci-ety about their crim-i-nal face.

K: As a union leader and a SYRIZA mem-ber, when you speak to mem-bers of your own union or to work-ers in Piraeus in gen-eral who aren't mem-bers or sup-port-ers of SYRIZA, what kinds of argu-ments do peo-ple make and how do you respond and try to orga-nize them?

G: First of all, they are afraid that they are going to act like the pre-vi-ous gov-ern-ments. They say now that they are not going to pri-va-tize the port and finally they will do it. So these are the main argu-ments I hear. What I say hon-estly is that I don't believe they will do it, but in case they are pres-sured or they change their mind, I'm sure that they are going to fight from a bet-ter posi-tion. We are going to have for sure a more demo-c-ra-tic gov-ern-ment. I'm cer-tain we are going to take part in an open dialogue, and any-way, not only our abil-ity to fight but our respon-si-bil-ity to fight is here. And we are going to be against any-one, even if it's SYRIZA in power, who undermines our rights and our jobs. It's clear.

K: Are there other strate-gic sec-tors that you would like to see pass to pub-lic ownership?

G: Energy com-pa-nies, for sure, I don't have to men-tion the health sys-tem and educa-tion sys-tem, uni-ver-si-ties, trains and roads, should be taken back from sub-con-trac-tors that have taken a very big amount of money. For exam-ple, I trav-eled to my vil-lage which is 350 km from Athens recently dur-ing the Christ-mas hol-i-days and we paid 45 euros for the tolls, for the roads that were paid to be con-structed by the state. I want to see my dad but I don't want to pay 45 euros to go and see him. So for all these sec-tors, I think they should remain public.

K: What is your opin-ion of the argu-ments made by SYRIZA fig-ures like Costas Lapavit-sas in favor of Greece leav-ing the Eurozone?

G: Per-son-ally, I think the euro as a cur-ency is a means, it's not the objec-tive. It's the means to have an econ-omy. What is an econ-omy? An econ-omy is ok if it serves peo-ple and pro-vides a cer-tain level of secu-rity to the peo-ple - jobs, health sys-tems, edu-ca-tion. So in those terms, the euro is a tool. Apart from this, it is a polit-i-cal issue. I would pre-fer to see what chances we have inside the Euro-zone. And after that, for sure inside the Euro-pean Union, which is some-thing dif-fer-ent. And after that if they insist, if they say, you have to keep get-ting fucked over, you have to be sac-ri-ficed so as to remain in the Euro-zone, no. I think that if that moment comes, we should go to a ref-er-en-dum and decide alto-gether. And from Lapavit-sas' side, I was fol-low-ing him dur-ing 2011 and 2012 - for two years, I was fol-low-ing his speeches. I was quite open to hear-ing such opin-ions but I was not per-suaded that they have a clear answer espe-cially for the first period of a trans-fer from the euro to a local cur-ency. They didn't con-vince me that they have some-thing con-crete to pro-pose to the peo-ple for those first crit-i-cal six months of tran-si-tion. And you know, our soci-ety is not trained or edu-cated to suf-fer under such terms. For exam-ple, if you leave the euro, the iPhone will be three or four times more expen-sive. I don't care. I don't give a damn. But many peo-ple give a damn about some items that they don't even have the power to buy in euros. So I'm ready to wait for gaso-line and to do my part and not to demand more but I know many guys around me that would be happy to sim-ply take their share and their family's share for the month. So I think we're not trained well enough to con-front

such a danger.

K: There have been some criticisms that SYRIZA has moved toward personalistic leadership and is becoming too focused on individual politicians - do you share this view?

G: It's becoming too presidential, yes. That's true. I'm one of these guys that are criticizing Tsipras although I recognize that he is very charismatic, very clever, very efficient. He can represent our core ideas and all this that we call SYRIZA. Unfortunately, the last six months, we have seen that the party procedures were not respected and some decisions were taken with a small group around the president. This is a problem. This is a problem which we have addressed within the organs of the party. It's something that we cannot prevent now, now that he is Prime Minister. This kind of thing will happen more and more, I think. But I hope that the collective reactions, the collective interventions will ameliorate this. And of course I'm not saying that he's like Georgios Papan-dreou or Samaras. He's a left guy. And he's not going to act in such a way. But ok, within the left spectrum, he has made some mistakes - not respecting the organs of the party - and he was trying especially during the pre-election period to put things as far back as possible so as to have less collective procedures. I'm also critical of this. But I don't know if it's personal decisions or people surrounding him. For example, there are one or two guys that are not so clever, in my opinion, that don't have such a collective way of acting, though I don't want to minimize his responsibilities. I prefer to give responsibility to a team, a party, a union. That's why I'm accusing the team of leadership. It's not just one man.

K: Do you participate in a political current within SYRIZA?

G: I was participating in the meetings of AKOA, the Renewing Communist Ecological Left, a Euro-communist party and one of the founding members of SYRIZA. Inside SYRIZA, AKOA, with two smaller groups, created ANASA, which in Greek means breathe. ANASA became an official political current. It doesn't have a structure, there is an open dialogue between ANASA and some guys from the majority of the party, meaning close to Tsipras and close to the president's group. They're critical and they created what is called the Group of Fifty-Three, fifty-three members of the central committee. So this Group of Fifty-Three, it's getting bigger and bigger, it's not fifty-three anymore, it's more. We don't have a very strict structure. Actually it's a group for dialogue that is trying to promote collectivity within the party, trying to prevent factionalism, trying to prevent the leadership from making decisions without being approved by the collective, and trying to prevent the presidential leadership group from making mistakes and taking decisions out of the hands of the party.

K: What can worker movements in general learn from this experience?

G: This topic we could talk about for some hours. Look, the motto that SYRIZA used during the pre-election period was that hope is coming. So now we feel that hope has come and we think it's a great opportunity for the working class to start breathing. In my personal opinion, it's a period of responsibility for all of us to go beyond ourselves, not to have the first demand be for our union, for ourselves, but to try to develop more collective demands, more fundamental demands, and to start the hard work of positive criticism, of serious impact proposals. Because I think now we are fighting from a better position, but we are still fighting. It doesn't mean that just because we have a very charismatic Prime Minister with good ministers that this is the end of the story, no. I've known these guys for many years. They are guys like ourselves. So I can imagine that if I were in that position how important it could be for me to have the support of the people. I would feel more secure having people back me. Not to follow them and to say yes to everything they say, no, but to support the right decisions, to keep our presence and to keep our signature being active in every decision they take. It's really serious and I feel more responsibility because as General Secretary of the union, it's a lot of work for me to mobilize people, having fulfilled their main demand, meaning that the port is not going to be sold but I want the state to own it. It's difficult. But it's the only way we're going to succeed, knowing that the program is not something

Syriza's victory seen by a dockworker, union leader from the Port of Piraeus

rev-o-lu-tion-ary. It's a clear social demo-c-ra-tic pro-gram. But in order to achieve a social-ist soci-ety, we need some time so as to pass through a real social demo-c-ra-tic path with social-ism as the end goal.

K: What is the sig-nif-i-cance of the elec-tion for work-ers out-side of Greece?

G: I have to tell you that I have received from our friends who are dock-work-ers in Europe many, many mes-sages, con-grat-u-la-tions, very opti-mistic mes-sages. They are wait-ing, at least the peo-ple I am in con-tact with, and they are very close to my men-tal-ity, they were very happy. And they really want to see this gov-ern-ment succeed, because they feel that this will trig-ger changes in this direc-tion in their countries. I do believe that the gov-ern-men-tal change in Greece will have a snow-ball effect.

K: What can peo-ple out-side of Greece do to sup-port the polit-i-cal process in Greece?

G: First of all, they should not lis-ten to the main-stream mass media and should try to find alter-na-tive infor-ma-tion. It's really impor-tant. I'm fol-low-ing what the mass media in Ger-many has been say-ing these past two or three days and it's really too biased. They are against the new gov-ern-ment and they don't tell the truth. The sec-ond thing is that they should show their sol-i-dar-ity actively. For exam-ple, I know that today (Janu-ary 31) PODEMOS are hav-ing a big man-i-fes-ta-tion in Madrid, so as to crit-i-cize Rajoy for his state-ments at the Euro-pean meet-ing about Euro-pean debt. These kinds of actions are really encour-ag-ing the Greek peo-ple and encour-ag-ing Greece's new elected gov-ern-ment to go on. To Euro-peans, I have to say that we have to remain together and to remain together as nations, not as com-pa-nies or as multi-na-tion-als. SYRIZA is another Greek exper-i-ment. Greece was an exper-i-ment in aus-ter-ity for the past five years and now I think it will be an exper-i-ment in prosperity.

31 January 2015

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https://viewpointmag.com/2015/02/16/the-view-from-the-grassroots-an-interview-with-giorgos-gogos-on-syrizas-electi
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