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Interview with Eric Toussaint

# "Alexis Tsipras is right to call for an international conference on debt"

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**Eric Toussaint was interviewed by Tassos Tsakiroglou for *•fimerida ton Syntakton (The Editors Journal)***

**" Manuel Valls and Matteo Renzi are asking for more time to reduce their countries' deficits, offering in exchange reforms that would make their countries more competitive. Is this a real challenge to the European austerity consensus? Can this bring about some advantages?"**

I think their request will be refused. The European Commission wants to continue to apply its brutal austerity policies over the whole of the European Union, in particular to the peripheral countries (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and the central and eastern European countries), but also to countries like France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and Germany. If the French and Italian governments managed to persuade the European Commission to abandon austerity policies, that would be welcome, but it's impossible. Even as they are making these requests to the European Commission, Mr. Hollande and Mr. Renzi are keeping up the pressure on the labour market, making it more precarious. In Italy, for example, Mr. Renzi is attacking the remaining social achievements that Mr. Berlusconi failed to destroy. What's more, we know that the Valls government in France is favourably inclined towards the big corporations, banks and insurance companies.

**" Alexis Tsipras has called for an international conference for the abolition of the debt of the Southern European countries that are affected by the crisis, similar to what was done for Germany in 1953, when 22 countries, including Greece, cancelled a large part of the German debt. Is this a realistic possibility today?"**

This is a legitimate demand. Unlike Nazi Germany, Greece has not caused any conflict on European soil. The Greek people can strongly insist that the Greek debt is illegal or illegitimate and should be cancelled, just as the German debt was in 1953. [2] However, I don't think that SYRIZA and other European political forces can convince the European institutions to get together around a table to do the same as was done for Germany in 1953. Although this request is legitimate, and this is why I have supported the Tsipras candidature to the Presidency of the European Commission [3], it will not be possible to bring the governments of the main European economies and the EU institutions to the table on this agenda.

The experience of the last ten years has shown that unilateral sovereign acts can get results. The creditors that reclaim the payment of an illegitimate debt and impose violent measures that attack fundamental human rights, including economic and social rights, must be refused. I think that Greece has strong arguments for forming a government that would have popular support for working in this direction. Such a popular leftist government could establish a debt audit committee that would include a large popular democratic participation. This audit committee would unilaterally suspend repayments and finally repudiate the part of the debt that it identifies as illegal and/or odious.

**" In Greece, SYRIZA is topping all the polls and several of its leaders have declared that any debt negotiation will be done within the Eurozone context and will not be a unilateral decision. What do you have to say about this?"**

Yes, I know the official SYRIZA position. Personally, I try to show that another way is possible. It's clear that most of the Eurozone governments and the ECB will not agree to an important reduction of Greek debt. So, in spite of SYRIZA's willingness to negotiate, I think it will be impossible to come to terms with all. This requires a more radical approach - there is no other possibility - just as was done by Iceland after 2008, Ecuador in 2007 - 2009 and

Argentina between 2001 and 2005.

Since then, those governments have made a series of mistakes and abandoned their radical positions. This why they are in great difficulty today, as is the case of Argentina, that I have recently visited. The Argentine parliament has passed a law that means Argentina must, from now on, act in a sovereign fashion in the management of its debt. It was agreed to create a Congressional Audit Committee that will sit for three months; we will see whether this does come about.

**" You have said that reducing public debt is necessary, but not sufficient to bring the EU countries out of the crisis, that other strong measures will be necessary in different sectors. Can you, briefly, tell us more?"**

First of all, nationalize the banks - I prefer to use the term socialization. I think that the Greek banks, and the banks of other countries, should become public and be put to the service of the population, in a framework of strict regulations imposing the rules and the objectives fixed by the population. Controlling the circulation of capital is also essential, in particular that made by the big financial institutions. I am not talking about remittances of 1,000 or 2,000 euros, but large sums, which would require authorization by controlling authorities, without which a guilty bank would be sanctioned by heavily dissuasive fines and the revocation of its banking licence. This measure must be seriously applied. It would be a protection for ordinary users who make reasonably-sized international transfers of money. Tax reform is also very important: reduce taxes paid by the majority of the population and greatly increase, on a progressive scale, those imposed on the richest households and international companies, whether national or foreign.

**" And for Greece?"**

SYRIZA made interesting propositions during the 2012 elections. If there is a SYRIZA government the unjust laws (in particular, those that abolished collective bargaining between labour and employers) that were passed under pressure from the Troika must be repealed. Other necessary measures would include: radical tax reform favouring social justice and redistribution of the country's wealth; the abolition of the most unfair taxes paid by the poor and increased taxation of the rich; an audit of the debt and the repudiation of the part identified as illegal and/or odious; socialization of the banks and control of the movement of capital.

**" As Naomi Klein has said, "Neoliberal capitalism is fundamentally at war with life on Earth". Recently, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets in many countries to protest against climate change. What does this mean?"**

This very important because, worldwide, more and more people are becoming aware that we are facing global problems: global inequalities damage the climate, push people to migrate, and cause wars. International protest movements are fundamental and essential. Nevertheless, they need to be strengthened. I am impatient to see greater, and stronger, worldwide mobilisation of the peoples.

*Translated from French to English by Snake Arbusto, Vickie Briault and Mike Krolikowski.*

The original Greek version is available here : <http://www.efsyn.gr/?p=245093>

*Translated by Christian Haccuria, from Greek to French.*

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[1] The original version appeared on Sunday, 20 October 2014 in the Greek centre-Left daily *efimerida ton Syntakton* (Journal of Editors): <http://www.efsyn.gr/?p=245093>, «*Η απόφαση της κυβέρνησης να μην πληρώσει το χρέος της Ελλάδας είναι η καλύτερη λύση για να βάλει τέλος στην κρίση*». The French version was reviewed by Éric Toussaint.

[2] See the article: Eric Toussaint, "[The cancellation of German debt in 1953 versus the attitude to the Third World and Greece](#)", published 18 August 2014.

[3] In 2014, when the new President of the EU Commission was designated, the European Left parliamentary group had nominated Alexis Tsipras as a candidate against Jean-Claude Juncker (supported by the European People's Party and the European Socialist group) and a liberal.