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Greece

Debating the future of Greece

- Debate - Perspectives in Greece -

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On November 30-December 2 2012, Greece's Coalition of the Radical Left, known as SYRIZA, held a national conference as the first step in transforming the coalition into a more unified political formation. SYRIZA was formed in 2004 as an electoral alliance uniting radical left-wing organizations— there are now more than a dozen member groups. But since its inspiring success in nearly winning national elections last spring, SYRIZA'S ranks have been swelled by many unaffiliated individuals. This article from December 2012 assesses the key dynamics.

SYRIZA's mass appeal was based on its rejection of the austerity program supported by Greece's two main parties, the center-left PASOK and center-right New Democracy. Instead, SYRIZA pledged to immediately cancel the two so-called Memorandums—agreements made between the Greek government and the "troika" of the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund that require savage cuts, privatization and anti-working class laws in return for a bailout of Greece's financial system.

The conference was preceded by a discussion among member groups and in branches of a draft declaration put forward by SYRIZA's leading body, its secretariat. Here, we publish a contribution to that pre-conference debate by six members of the SYRIZA secretariat, representing three organizations on the coalition's left wing: the Internationalist Workers Left (DEA), Kokkino (which means "Red") and the Anti-capitalist Political Group (APO).

SYRIZA supporters celebrate on the night of the elections on May 6

The draft declaration issued by the secretariat of SYRIZA for discussion in the branches about the unitary project of the radical left raises important political questions in a critical period.

Because we view the transformation of SYRIZA towards a unified political entity as mostly a process of constructing political unity among a broad part of the left, we will focus our contribution on political and programmatic questions in the draft declaration. This doesn't mean that we underestimate questions about the ideological and strategic orientation. On the contrary, for many reasons, we consider the explicit commitment of SYRIZA to an anti-capitalist/socialist strategy to be very valuable.

But we think it is obvious that the ideological distinctions and differences between the various currents and traditions that co-exist in SYRIZA will continue to exist for some time, especially around the issues about achieving socialism. As long as political unity remains strong, we believe that these differences will continue to serve as a valuable asset for SYRIZA and not as a source of problems.

We believe that among all the issues raised in the draft document, members and branches of SYRIZA should focus their attention on these:

1. Do we insist on standing for a "government of the left," or are there other possibilities for SYRIZA, given the crisis besetting the coalition government?

The draft declaration states that the main goal of SYRIZA should be a left-wing government "with roots on a wide front of social and political forces." In order to succeed in this goal, the document states that: a) "We insist on the need for common action and a united front of the left"; b) "We are engaged with all our forces in the effort to build a powerful social movement and a mass political movement"; and c) "We must strengthen and broaden SYRIZA."

This position is correct. It should be defended and reaffirmed at the national conference.

The position has been questioned, with other formulations put forward for SYRIZA's goals, such as:

“A government of the anti-Memorandum forces”: This proposal conceals support for a coalition government with the Independent Greeks, a party led by Panos Kammenos [Translator's note: a split from the main right-wing party New Democracy, which opposes the Memorandum, but from a nationalist perspective).

This proposal tries to address SYRIZA's need for allies and the possible question of how to achieve a parliamentary majority in the next elections, but in doing so, it creates serious problems for the political and strategic orientation of SYRIZA. Kammenos' party, despite its anti-Memorandum rhetoric, remains a neoliberal force. It remains a right-wing party, and it could serve as a pillar for a possible nationalist and pro-war alternative for Greek capitalism as a way to confront the crisis.

“A government of social (or national) salvation”: SYRIZA passed this test successfully between the elections in May and June (Translator's note: when SYRIZA withstood huge pressure to join a coalition government with bourgeois political parties in order to stop “instability”). It has to hold its ground against the same pressure today, even in the face of a threat of an economic stalemate and a severe financial crisis.

A coalition government with a wide range of bourgeois political forces (and perhaps even a right-wing party?) will only serve to re-stabilize the establishment, no matter what form this takes. Such a government would be at odds with the goals of the left, and it would be against the interests of the workers and the youth.

No matter how nicely such a solution is presented—for example, in the form of an “emergency” government, with “a specific mandate and task”—it is impossible to ignore the problems it will create. No one should forget the negative experience of 1989 [Translator's note: when left-wing parties entered a coalition government with the right, and later a “national unity” government—a betrayal committed with the excuse that the new government had a “specific mandate and task” of dealing with a major corruption scandal).

2. The promise to reverse austerity

SYRIZA is now explicitly committed to unilaterally cancelling the Memorandums and all of the austerity laws in a “government of the left.” This position was reiterated in parliament by Alexis Tsipras.

SYRIZA has to combine this position with support for the demands of the people in struggle, around restoration of wages and pensions, protection of public schools and hospitals and the reversal of the attempts to undo labor laws. These must be the first priorities for SYRIZA, defended by any means necessary.

We understand the financial difficulties a left-wing government will face and—as a consequence—the time and the effort needed for focusing on this front. In SYRIZA's electoral program, we gave a glimpse of our response to this issue—with the promise to immediately restore cuts for workers at the lowest wages and pensions and to restore cuts at average wage and pension levels gradually.

This position is very different from those expressed by some leading figures who speak about “freezing” wages and pensions at the level they are at now—and who commit only to the promise that there will no more austerity measures. These are totally different political stands, and the ambiguity must be resolved by SYRIZA.

3. The resources needed to finance the popular measures of a left-wing government

This is the most serious argument put forward by our enemies. SYRIZA's response must be built on the clearest of commitments on three issues:

“ a) Immediate halt on payments and cancelation of the debt. We, together with many other comrades, support the policy of an immediate, unilateral halt on paying interest and cancelation of the debt.

SYRIZA has chosen a more “complex,” but also contradictory approach, which remains open to some dangerous interpretations, including: an audit of the debt; cancelation of a big part of it, though not all; a moratorium on debt payments; a voluntary postponement of payments negotiated with creditors; and ultimately a repayment of the rest of the debt in better economic times on the basis of a “growth rate clause.” All of these measures leave the general oversight of debt issues at the European level.

But from “the first day in office,” a crucial dilemma will emerge for SYRIA: Will a left-wing government continue to pay the local and international loan sharks? If we continue payments, which today total over 11 billion euros annually, this will bleed public funds and lead, every year, to the need to impose a new “package” of austerity.

To continue repaying creditors is practically impossible—it amounts to more than 50 percent of public spending annually, without foreign financial support. Since we know that the Troika will not continue to finance a left-wing government that will reverse austerity, the choice we have to make—“ending payments”—is inevitable. But it must be made with a clarity that will activate social forces to support this action, while neutralizing hostile social forces.

“ b) Taxation on capital and wealth. The draft declaration correctly proposes measures to tax accumulated wealth. But it obscures the crucial issue of taxing corporate profits. The election position of SYRIZA for a 45 percent tax rate on profits must be restored or replaced with another equally concrete proposal.

In contrast to what we heard from the media, during the crisis, hundreds of big enterprises have made significant profits. Even the IMF and the EU now argue that it is impossible to deal with the fiscal problems of states as long as capital continues to enjoy tax immunity. Of course, such a tax policy on capital must be combined with measures of control over the economy, in order to suppress capital flight or a tax rebellion by businesses.

This measure, like ending debt payments, is also inevitable and must be made forthrightly. In this way, we will show that we view the character of a left-wing government as merely “transitional” and a step toward socialism.

“ c) Nationalization of banks and privatized public enterprises, under public and democratic workers' control. This is the third aspect of securing not only financial resources but the tools needed to support and defend a pro-worker popular policy. It is another electoral commitment of SYRIZA that needs to be restated and put forward with consistency.

We must insist on the implementation of our nationalization program—“firstly and mainly, the banks, but also the privatized public enterprises and those that are in the process of privatization right now. This program must be carried out without paying compensation to major stockholders and in defiance, if necessary, of market rules and regulations, European treaties about free trade and competition, etc.

Taking into account the social and economic collapse caused by the Memorandum policies and also the lack of public funds SYRIZA will inherit from Memorandum governments, even a single nationalization, if carried out by

buying stock from shareholders, will be both impossible and socially unjust. Nor will a left-wing government be able to exercise a pro-worker policy or withstand the attacks of capitalist forces if it doesn't move immediately toward a program of mass nationalizations.

4. Confronting the blackmail of the EU

During the pre-election period we formulated the position "Not a single sacrifice for the euro."

This meant that a left-wing government: a) would refuse the savage austerity demanded by the EU as a means of saving the Eurozone; b) would take this refusal to submit to austerity to the European level, placing its hopes in the active support of the working class movement and the international left; and c) wouldn't identify with those sections of European leaders (such as François Hollande, Mariano Rajoy, Mario Monti, etc.) who may support more flexible policies about the debt, but who insist on austerity programs in order to deal with the eurozone crisis.

Today, the eruption of struggles in the Southern Europe and the popularity of our position among other left-wing forces require us to maintain the slogan "Not a single sacrifice for the euro" and to make it a part of everyday political action as a minimum unifying characteristic of SYRIZA.

5. Reaffirmation of the genuine antiracist character of SYRIZA's politics

The draft declaration underplays the commitment to opposing racism of the vast majority of forces in SYRIZA. This commitment, which our enemies use against us, was clear to the people during the election, when they propelled us to our 27 per cent of the vote.

Stating the need to cancel "Dublin 2" (Translator's note: a treaty that obliges Greece to keep all immigrants entering the EU inside its territory and not allow them to travel to other EU states), which would be an important democratic advance in allowing immigrants to acquire travel documents in order to leave Greece, is not enough. This position is mentioned in the program of the far-right LAOS party and even in the program of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

The crucial issue for SYRIZA is its position in favor of legalization and providing equal rights to all immigrants who wish to remain in Greece. There should be no retreat from this position. On this basis, SYRIZA must insist on three main points:

â€" a) Immigrants are not the problem, racism is. If we accept that immigration is a problem, even if we promise to "solve it in a sensitive and humanitarian way," we will have already made the first and crucial concession to the pressure of racism.

â€" b) We stand in decisive opposition to national and European policies of border control. We are against the headhunters, FRONTEX, the transformation of the Coast Guard into a military force against immigrants, and fences and mine fields on the borders.

â€" c) We are for legalization for all immigrants who wish to remain in the country.

The history of SYRIZA proves that it is radical politics that work, even in elections, and not adjusting to pressures on us or sliding in conservative directions.

6. What kind of “broadening” of SYRIZA?

We started our contribution from the position that the call for a left-wing government is based on a policy of left-wing unity, with systematic initiatives by SYRIZA directed at the Communist Party, ANTARSYA and other left-wing forces. It is this kind of “broadening” that we will continue to support as a top priority.

This commitment shouldn't change because of the negative responses of the leaderships of other political forces. For example, the more the leadership of the Communist Party slips to isolationism and its unique but clear position that a working-class victory is impossible at this time, the more SYRIZA must insist, seriously and responsibly, on initiatives directed at joint action.

This commitment isn't at odds with appealing to large parts of the social base of social democracy. On the contrary, the insistence on struggles, on radical politics and on presenting clear alternative political proposals managed to attract thousands and thousands from the popular classes who placed their hopes in social democracy in the past.

SYRIZA's 27 per cent of the vote was a result of its historical development and its overall attitude during a course of years. It isn't the result of some high-profile defections from ex-members of PASOK.

In the present situation, with PASOK disintegrating, we believe that SYRIZA must be aggressive and daring when it comes to addressing and winning over the rank and file of PASOK, but it must also be very careful when it comes to accepting high-profile members of PASOK. We believe that groupings or individuals who held governmental responsibilities or central political roles in PASOK in the past have no place in the branches or on the ballot representing SYRIZA.

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