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Greece

Growing polarization to the left and to the extreme right

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The September 16 election held in Greece was marked by the catastrophic forest fires at the end of August which destroyed large parts of the western Peloponnese, Euboea and other parts of the country. Sixty-seven people and 70,000 animals burnt to death, and some villages were destroyed.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Gelect.jpg>]

Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis at rally in Thessaloniki

The refusal of past governments, of the social democratic PASOK (1981-89, 1993-2004) and the bourgeois conservative New Democracy (ND -1989-1993, 2004-7), to protect the forests and the general environment by adequate measures was responsible for the disaster. The results of the elections were influenced by these events, with an increase in support for the moderate left "Green Alternatives" from 0 to 1%, and of abstentions and spoiled votes from 25.8% to 28.7%.

Prime Minister Karamanlis (ND) opted for early elections because an election victory of the ND seemed sure. He and his government intend to push forward and speed-up their program of counter-reforms. The ND fell from 45.4% to 41.8% of the votes, but can continue to govern with 152 out of 300 deputies due to the undemocratic election law. The government is weakened, but the result was a relative success for it. The surprise was that the PASOK, the main opposition party, also suffered big losses and fell from 40.6% to 38.1%. The votes for the big two parties, which used to guarantee a certain stability of the social and political system in favour of capitalist class rule after 1974, decreased from 85.9% to 79.9%.

The election winners were the traditionalist Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (CPG) which rose from 5.9 to 8.2% and the left alliance SYRIZA, consisting of the former Eurocommunist, left reformist SYN ("Alliance of the Left") and some smaller leftist groups, among them the left Stalinist KOE ("Communist Organization of Greece") and two semi-Trotskyist groups, DEA ("Internationalist Workers' Left", a split from the SEK and close to the ISO/US) and "Kokkino" ("Red", a split from DEA, interested in the 4th International). SYRIZA rose from 3.2 to 5.0%. If one adds the results of the extra-parliamentary groups, the CPG-ML (0.24%), the ML-CPG (0.11%), the alliances MERA (0.17%) and ENANTIA (0.15%), to which the OKDE-Spartakos, the Greek section of the 4th International, also belongs, the total result of the political space at the left of the PASOK is 13.9%.

At the same time, the right-wing extremist and racist LAOS ("Popular-Orthodox Alarm") rose from 2.2 to 3.8% surpassing the requirement of 3% to be represented in the parliament. The LAOS is extremely pro-capitalist and will put pressure on the ND government to perform its reactionary program decisively. The LAOS will also represent the chauvinist popular "anger" regarding the irrational dispute over the name of the neighbour country, called "Republic of Macedonia" or "FYROM" [= Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia], since the Greek state insists that the name "Macedonia" belongs exclusively to its northern province. Some groups of neo-nazi thugs and openly fascist groups and individuals, some of whom were elected as deputies, are an essential part of LAOS's identity. Particularly worrying is that the LAOS had its best results in the workers' suburbs of Athens, Piraeus and Salonica.

Thus, the election is marked by a polarization to the left and to the extreme right at the expense of the big parties of the centre-right and centre-left. This trend is likely to get stronger in the future because the economic and political crisis is sharpening and class contradictions are increasing. Despite the election victory of the ND and the success of LAOS, the result shows a limited but clear shift to the left

The defeat of the PASOK

The PASOK was not able to take advantage of various scandals of the ND government, like the robbing of pension funds, the policy of privatization of the universities, corruption affairs, the brutality of the police, the increasing debts of private households and the rise in prices. This failure is partly attributable to the bland president, George Papandreou, the son of the party founder and long time Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou. But the defeat has deeper reasons. Particularly during the years of the K. Simitis governments (1996-2004), the party and its governments pursued more and more right-wing and neoliberal policies which led to the heavy defeat of 2004. Afterwards, the party followed a very half-hearted line of opposition, retreated from any forms of protests, mobilizations or strikes against the governmental policy contenting itself with addressing issues of secondary importance.

The rank and file of the party, in the past rather active, was virtually dissolved by the leadership. G. Papandreou himself recently declared that the PASOK "has transformed itself into an apparatus of exercising power and has ignored the needs of broad popular layers". The trade union leadership, still to a large extent controlled by PASOK bureaucrats, try, with very few exceptions, to suffocate all kinds of rank and file mobilizations against pro-business measures. In the 2-3 weeks before the election, Papandreou tried to change the situation by making verbally significant promises in the direction of the working people and the non-privileged popular layers, but the electorate did not take them very seriously. After all, the PASOK got what it deserved for more or less unconditionally lining up with big business interests over a long period.

After the defeat, a sharp struggle broke out over the leadership of the party. Papandreou's challenger, V. Venizelos, is even more right-wing than the present party president. A left wing, which could express the needs of the workers and broader layers, at least in a classical reformist way, is very unlikely to appear. The main hope for the future is that parts of the rank and file will break away from the party's leadership.

The success of the CPG and of the SYRIZA

For the first time, the CPG could exploit the crisis of the PASOK to a large extent. It remains the leading force of the Greek left. It uses a lot of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric. But it does not surpass classic reformist conceptions like "popular economy" directed to an alliance with small sections of the bourgeoisie and a "popular front". It appears, however, as the "most left-wing" force of the parties represented in the parliament and thus attracts most of the left-wing protest votes. Always organizing its own protest marches and refusing any collaboration with other parties or organizations, the CP cultivates its resolute sectarianism. The policy of its leadership is one of the most severe obstacles to the success of mobilizations, strikes and movements.

The CP leadership is deeply nationalist and supports "its own" bourgeoisie in all important issues of foreign affairs, be it Cyprus or the Aegean sea. Sometimes it does not even recoil from alliances with extreme right-wing forces. One of the CP deputies, the independent journalist Liana Kanelli, is a fanatic supporter of "patriotism" based on religious-orthodox ideas. The party strives for Greece's exit from the EU without offering any convincing internationalist perspective. Its ideas on "socialism" draw upon on the old discredited Stalinist model. It is an open question to which extent the strengthening of the CP will serve the needs of the workers' movement and the social resistance.

The increase of the other left reformist force, SYRIZA, under the leadership of the SYN and its president Alavanos was significant too. The SYN turned after 2000 to the left, participates in various movements and was active in the European Social Forum that held its successful congress in Athens last year. The SYN managed to rebuild a youth

organization, mainly at the universities, and tries to present an open, left-pluralist, ecologist, etc. profile in different struggles. The SYRIZA declared that there would be no governmental collaboration with the neoliberal PASOK after the elections. The strategic orientation of the SYN, however, is indissolubly tied to alliances with PASOK at the level of communities, districts, in the trade unions, and also at the level of national politics. Like all other parties of the "European Left", the SYN leadership is deeply convinced that the capitalist system has to be reformed by adequate left parliamentarian and, finally, governmental policies and that the neoliberal model has to be replaced by improvements of the social welfare state.

The practical involvement of the SYN in actions and mobilizations is rather cautious and most of the SYN trade union leaders do not take significant initiatives which could seriously challenge the passivity and defeatism which is promoted by the PASOK-dominated bureaucracies. A strong right wing of the party rejects left activism and any alliance with smaller left radical organizations as a matter of principle, and supports a "realistic" line. That means alliances with PASOK on all levels. The SYN leadership is very likely to attempt to take advantage of the crisis of the PASOK in order to occupy the free space on the left for a new left reformist project.

The anticapitalist left

For several decades, the Greek extra-parliamentary left has been divided into dozens of organizations with Maoist, other Stalinist, Trotskyist, etc. origins. Due to this confusing situation and to a strong need for recognition of the various "leaderships", it continues to have difficulties to build a socially rooted, alternative pole, although its activists play an important role in all social and political conflicts. In the municipal elections of 2006, for the first time in many years, alliances of the radical left won quite good results, 1-2% in some suburbs of Athens and Pireas. Before the September elections, some organizations tried in a serious way to discuss their differences and to consider a united front of the anticapitalist left.

The SEK, affiliated to the British SWP (and the IST, the "International Socialist Tendency", founded by Tony Cliff and his co-thinkers) and known until a few months ago for its peculiar sectarianism, took an important initiative and approached, among other organizations, the NAR ("New Left Current", originating in the CP's youth organization, that was bureaucratically expelled by the CP leadership in 1989), one of the other relatively big organizations which leads the leftist alliance "MERA" ("Front of the Radical Left"). In June, the SEK, ARAN, ARAS and OKDE-Spartakos launched the alliance "ENANTIA" ("United Anticapitalist Left") aiming at expressing the movements of the last years, of the bank employees, the teachers, the students and others, but generally also the rights of the immigrants and the outrage about the catastrophic balance sheet of environmental policies.

Due to the specific sectarianism of the NAR and MERA, and despite the fact that a normal person interested in left politics would have difficulty understanding the differences between MERA and ENANTIA, it was not possible to create a common list of the two anticapitalist alliances. The election results remained low. It is obvious that the dominance of the reformist left could not be broken in the recent period. But a more skillful and flexible policy, orientated towards unity in action, can contribute decisively to gathering the leading activists of the workers' and other social movements, towards creating an anticapitalist pole of attraction. Such a political project can be successful in the coming period if broader layers of workers, youth, women and immigrants start acting in the spirit of a united front against the plans of government and Capital.

Prospects

There is no doubt about the intentions of the old-new government. The reactionary counter reforms of the pension

scheme, which means a more coordinated regulation of it downwards, the increase of the pensionable age, the selling or the closure of Olympic Airways, the erosion of permanent employment in the public sector, more privatizations, particularly of the telephone company OTE and the electricity company DEI, are on the agenda. That is precisely what the president of the employers' association, SEV, expressed in his congratulatory letter to Karamanlis upon his re-election. The coming months will show how the parties and organizations of the left, the trade unions and the workers' movement, confront the expected wave of attacks being prepared and launched by the government and big business.

Table of the most important results

Party	2004, %	2007, %	2007, seats
ND (New Democracy - main bourgeois party)	45,40	41,80	152
PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement - social democratic)	40,60	38,10	102
CPG (Greek Communist Party)	5,90	8,20	22
SYRIZA (Alliance of the SYN [the name of this left reformist party means "Left Alliance"] and some other organizations of the far left)	3,30	5,04	14
LAOS ("Popular Orthodox Alarm" - right-wing extremist)	2,20	3,80	10
Green Ecologists	-	1,10	-
CPG-ML (Maoists)	0,15	0,24	-
ML-CPG (Maoists)	0,07	0,11	-
MERA ("Front of the Radical Left", Alliance of far left organizations, led by NAR)	0,15	0,17	-
ENANTIA ("United Anticapitalist Left", Alliance of the far left organizations: SEK ["Soc. Workers Party"], ARAN, ARAS and OKDE-Spartakos)	-	0,15	-