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Greece

The capitulation of Tsipras leadership and the role of 'left europeanism'

- Debate - Perspectives in Greece -

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A crucial debate is taking place on the left, inside and outside of Greece, following the dramatic capitulation of the Tsipras leadership to the austerity agenda of the EU in return for the so-called 'bailout' deal of €86bn over three years.^[1]

Syriza has split and new elections have been called for September 20. A major recomposition is taking place on the Greek left. A new formation, Popular Unity (PU) has been created based around the former Left Platform (and Red Network) of Syriza that is carrying forward the banner of opposition to austerity in Greece.

The capitulation has created a dangerous situation for the people of Greece. There is a real danger that Syriza could fail to be the biggest party and the rightwing could be back in control. Currently Syriza and New Democracy are neck in the polls and Golden Dawn will seek to benefit. Tsipras has not ruled out a coalition with PASOK if he fails to form a government in any other way.

Internationally positions on the capitulation are being adopted. The leadership of De Linke in Germany and Podemos in Spain, for example, are supporting Tsipras although they have significant minorities supporting PU. In fact the whole De Linke organisation in the North Rhine-Westfalia Lander has refused to support the position.

Most significantly a number of leading figures of the European left including Mélenchon, Zoe Konstantopoulou, Oskar Lafontaine, and Yanis Varoufakis are calling for a summit of the European left to discuss a plan B for Europe in the wake of the climbdown.

The scale of the capitulation

A number of crucial questions are raised by this capitulation: Was there a viable alternative? What were the key political factors which led to the capitulation? Where does this leave the perspective of building broad left parties? Do we still call for governments of the anti-austerity left? Is it possible to oppose austerity and stay in the Eurozone? What does this say about the role of left Europeanism? Where does this leave the issue of a workers government? Did Syriza receive adequate support from the European left whilst in office?

The draconian terms attached to the deal were and are far worse than those already rejected by a remarkable 61% majority vote in the referendum on July 5 a vote which could hardly have been a clearer rejection of the politics and economics of austerity pursued by previous PASOK and New Democracy (ND) governments with such disastrous results. In fact the vote was more than 61% in the working class districts and amongst young people even up to 90%.

The result moreover was in the face of ferocious scaremongering by the media and the elites. Whether it was the result that Tsipras wanted is hard to tell.

What is clear is that his subsequent capitulation was and is a deeply humiliating climb down that will inflict untold suffering and humiliation on the people of Greece for many years. In fact it went beyond humiliation. It was a massive attack on democracy and meant that the Greek government had surrendered the right to run the country.

It was a defeat not only for the Greek working class and the Greek left but for the European movement and the European left—particularly in countries where there is a strong level of resistance.

It meant that the clearly expressed will of the people was subverted by the dictate of the EU elites and the European Central Bank (ECB), which starved the Greek banks of money.

Only days earlier at the mass rally, on the Friday before the referendum (an event that greatly strengthened the No vote), Tsipras had hinted that he and his government would resign if the vote went for Yes—since he was not prepared to introduce austerity. "There are plenty prepared to do that" he said, "but it will not be me".

The reaction of the left inside Syriza to the capitulation

To say that the deal was a dramatic reversal of Syriza's recent history is an understatement. In 2012 Syriza had stood on a platform that also included the repudiation of the memorandum and the restoration of the cuts, the socialisation of the banks and major industries, the restoration of the minimum wage and collective agreements, and a debt audit to prepare for a moratorium on repayments.

When it was elected to office in January of this year, it was the most left wing government in Europe in the post war period. It refused to contemplate any kind of coalition (or national government) with any pro-austerity party (including PASOK) and reaffirmed its total opposition to austerity.

It had a coalition arrangement with the right-wing but anti-austerity ANEL party which was unsupportable but not a major factor in the situation. It was a party with a democratic structure and minority rights and (consequently) had a large and organised left inside it—in the shape of the Left Platform and the Red Network—that had almost a third of the votes at the last party conference.

It was no surprise, therefore, that the capitulation split Syriza wide open—both in Parliament and in the party itself. In Parliament the deal was only adopted with the support of the pro-austerity opposition parties—including PASOK and the center right New Democracy (ND). 37 Syriza MP (mostly of the Left Platform) voted against the Memorandum and 7 more abstained. Just before the vote 109 Central Committee members signed a letter expressing their opposition to the deal.

The response of the Tsipras leadership to this revolt was to remove Left Platform MPs from ministerial positions. Six Left Platform ministers and deputy-ministers who had opposed the deal were sacked and replaced with pro-deal MPs.

Outside of Parliament a declaration was issued by 13 organisations of the Greek left it included the Left Platform, the Red Network, the CWI section and two of the component organisations of Antarsya calling for the formation of a broad political front which will give voice to the anti-austerity struggle.

Tsipras resigned (without reference to Syriza's Central Committee or its democratic structures) and a fresh election will now be held on September 20—the seventh in 8 years.

The announcement of a new election triggered frantic moves to set up a new radical left formation in time to

participate in the election – which was a change of course from the declaration of the 13. 24 MPs resigned from Syriza including Panayiotis Lafazanis, the former energy minister, to form such an organisation – called Popular Unity. 53 Left Platform and Red Network members of Syriza’s Central Committee resigned a few days later and are expected to join it.

The emergence of Popular Unity triggered a major recomposition process on the Greek left.

There has been a wave of resignations from Syriza at regional and local level. Most appear to be joining PU but not all. The Syriza MP and Parliamentary Speaker, Zoe Konstantopoulou, is apparently going to stand ‘in parallel’ with PU. She said in her letter to the President that the deal is “blatant blackmail by foreign governments of European Union member states on this government and on the members of parliament.”

Very significantly the youth organisation of Syriza has voted at its Central Committee to leave Syriza and join PU.

Most of the 13 groups that signed the declaration have joined PU. This has split Antarsya in the process. Several Antarsya groups including: ARAN (Left Recomposition), and ARAS (Left Regroupment) have joined PU. The Antarsya groups that have decided not to join include NAR (New Left Current), SEK (the IST section), and OKDE-Spartakos, the Greek section of the FI.

Kostas Skordoulis, a leading member of OKDE-Spartakos, interviewed in Left Voice, said the following: “Today, the PU wants to repeat the same failed experiment. They want to re-establish the good SYRIZA of 2012 with the same program. We did not relate to SYRIZA then, we are not going to relate to PU now.” The KKE have taken a similar position.

Popular Unity now represents, through its origins in the Left Platform and the Red Network, the continuity of the anti-austerity struggle in Greece. What is left of Syriza, under Tsipras, is now, likely to become the new PASOK. It will be the party best placed to force the austerity agenda on the Greek working class the coming period in Greece and will no doubt play that role.

My principal purpose here, however, is not to follow the development of PU in detail – which is a rapidly evolving situation – but to discuss the politics of the capitulation of the Tsipras leadership to the neo-liberal agenda and to start to draw a balance sheet of it for the benefit of future struggles.

The reactionary character of the deal

The terms attached to the bailout deal – ‘the third ‘Memorandum’ in the current crisis’ – are draconian in the extreme. They include swinging VAT increases, public sector wage cuts, pension ‘reform’, draconian welfare cuts and extensive privatisation. It hands the fiscal policy of the country over to the Troika. It gives the power to sell off Greece’s public assets, including ports and airports and energy supply, to a foreign agency that is empowered to pass on the proceeds to its creditors. It abolishes the economic sovereignty of Greece and reduces the country to dependency status. It is like reparations imposed on a defeated people.

The EU elites never accepted the establishment of a Syriza government with a programme of opposing austerity. They intended from the outset to smash it. It was a party elected on a programme that presented a clear alternative to the policies pursued by the ND of Samaras and previously by PASOK. Its existence was a practical (and dangerous) demonstration to the workers of Europe that such a government could win electoral support and with it

the possibility to follow an anti-austerity path and break with the demands of the European capitalism.

The deal was and is the collective punishment of the people of Greece for daring to challenge the austerity agenda and in particular for daring to vote against it in a popular vote in the referendum. The EU is saying loud and clear 'if you stay in the Euro you play by our rules'. They are saying that democracy means nothing and neoliberalism is the only acceptable economic and political framework. Any EU member state that opposes the neoliberal policies of austerity will be brought to its knees in the same way as with Greece.

Moreover there is no debt relief attached to the bailout package. Any suggestion of such relief was blocked by Germany, which reinforced its position as the dominant power in the EU in the course of these events. This reflects the real aim of the elites, which led by Germany, was never just to force the Greek government into submission but to impose on it the maximum humiliation in order to discredit the project it represented and deter others (such as Podemos for example) from challenging for governmental power.

The deal follows a six-year period during which Greece, the Greek economy and the working class have already suffered severe damage. Greek GDP and industrial production have plummeted, as has the standard of living. Welfare has been destroyed. Unemployment has reached record levels with women and young people the worst hit. Protective labour laws and regulations have been scrapped. Health and social services have been decimated.

The response of the Greek working class to this brutal assault was to make Greece the epicentre of resistance to austerity Europe-wide. There were almost 30 general strikes and multiple sectional strikes and local strikes. There were thousands of demonstrations and protests, neighborhood mobilisations, occupations and social movements. Despite all this the brutal terms of the Memorandum continue to be forced through. It is precisely this mass struggle and the need for a political dimension to it that gave Syriza the popular support that took it into government.

Like the first two 'bailouts', however, this one will achieve absolutely nothing other than more misery, poverty, deprivation, and a 25% decline in the economy. The fact is that the Greek debt is impossible to pay irrespective of the measures imposed on Greece. Even the IMF accepts this.

The brutality of the EU elites

It is true, of course, that Tsipras was put under massive pressure by the EU elites led by Germany and its hard line finance minister Wolfgang Schauble. It was an exercise in political brutality – political water boarding as was said at the time.

The Greek banks were forced to close. Cash withdrawals and financial transactions were severely restricted. There were daily predictions that the banks were on the verge of collapse. People were told by the elites and the media, as well as by the right wing in Greece, that rejection of the deal meant automatic expulsion from the Euro. Just to rub it in Schauble arrived at the 'negotiations' with a proposal that Greece should be expelled from the Eurozone for an initial period of five years.

The banks, and the threat of expulsion from the Eurozone, were, and still are, the weapons of choice of the EU elites when confronting a left government opposing austerity. Parties such as Podemos in the Spanish state that aspire to governmental office in order to fight austerity should take careful note of this.

Such pressure, however, was inevitable once a serious challenge was mounted to the core politics of the EU, which

was (and is) the austerity agenda. Failure to recognise this was naïve and dangerous.

Equally the notion that the elites might be shifted from this agenda by a clear expression of the democratic will of the Greek people, in either an election or a referendum—which was the strategy of the Tsipras leadership to the extent that it had one—was doomed from the outset. It was never going to happen. This was a major miscalculation: a total (and dangerous) misunderstanding of the realities of taking office in a crisis-ridden country in the EU and the Eurozone today.

None of this should have been a surprise. If one thing was clear when Syriza was elected to office on a wave of enthusiasm six months ago it was that it was heading for a massive confrontation with the EU elites.

The reactionary nature of the EU should be clear now if it was not before. We have seen an ideologically driven assault on the people of Greece by the EU elites to shore up the crisis-ridden construct of the EU, of the Maastricht Nice and Lisbon treaties, and above all, of the single European currency. We have also seen the emergence of Germany as the undisputed superpower of the EU and even more of the Eurozone.

The Euro was never just a currency (no currency is but the Euro much more so). It has always been a political and economic instrument designed (with the mechanisms built into it in the shape of the so called Stability and Growth Mechanism) to enforce austerity on the individual member states as and when necessary. To act as a supra-national enforcer tasked to ensure that the member states fully comply with both the rules of the EU and the neo-liberal agenda, which is at the heart of the EU itself. This is its ideological rationale.

To administer the Euro, the Maastricht Treaty established the ECB which alone could set interest rates in the zone covered by the new currency. It eliminated the ability of member states to conduct their own monetary policy—the money supply and interest rates. Fiscal policy—control of debt, deficit and government spending—was also constrained.

This analysis of the EU and the Eurozone has long been held by many sections of the left (including SR). It was not hyperbole (as some claimed) or dogma but an objective recognition of the reality of role of the EU which has now been clearly demonstrated in its application to Greece since the end of 2009.

Was there a viable alternative to capitulation?

So why did the Tsipras leadership capitulate in such a dramatic way in front of the onslaught from the elites and the financial institutions? Was it, as Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch argue (<http://links.org.au/node/4507>), because there was no viable alternative to capitulation available?

No it was not. There is and has always been a clear and viable alternative to the austerity agenda in Greece—though fighting for it and implementing was never going to be easy. Not that living under the terms of the deal (which is the capitulation option) would be easy either. In fact it will require massive hardship and sacrifice. Which would have been harder in the short term can be debated. Which would have been the best long-term option is not in question.

In fact Syriza was in a remarkably strong position following the referendum result to launch an anti-austerity initiative and consolidate the position of the government. The pro-austerity parties were completely defeated by it—more

comprehensively than at any time since the start of the crisis. This is even more profoundly so than after they lost the election in January. The ND leader and former PM Antonis Samaras resigned as soon as the result was announced. They were in total disarray.

Opposing the deal did, however, mean seriously preparing for the confrontation with the banks and the EU that would inevitably arise—and with no guarantee of success. This was, however, what Syriza had been elected for. It was its reason for existence.

It was quickly clear, however, that Tsipras was less than enthusiastic about doing this or indeed about the referendum result. He called a (cross party) meeting of the 'council of political leaders' under the president of Greece (including the rightwing parties) and at that meeting, Tsipras, the leader of the victorious No campaign threw in the towel and accepted the terms and conditions of the defeated Yes campaign. They must have been astonished. It was an astounding sequence of events.

Tsipras argued that he was forced to climb down because the bulk of the people of Greece were not prepared to leave the Euro. He argued that the Greek people only voted No because he had assured them that they could both reject austerity and also stay within the Euro?

There is a problem with this argument. The fact is that despite what Tsipras was saying, the bulk of the media and the European elites (not to mention the Yes campaign) were screaming at the top of their voices that a No vote was a vote to leave the Eurozone. People therefore must have felt that in voting No they were at the very least taking the risk of expulsion from the Euro. It is, therefore, not at all clear that such opposition to leaving the Euro was as solid as Tsipras presented it.

In any case no attempt had been made since Syriza had taken office (or for that matter before) to prepare the population for this situation or for any other perspective other than that of somehow persuading the elites to back down through negotiations. There had been no attempt to discuss with the people of Greece how an exit could be made to work and why they should not be intimidated by the threat. Varoufakis claims to have made some limited preparations, before he was removed from office, but these were not in the public domain.

This is important because any alternative course of action (to capitulation) would have meant standing firm against the EU elites when they threatened expulsion from the Eurozone and/or the EU and being prepared for exit if necessary—though whether the elites would have carried this through given the immense damage it would have done to the whole European project is another matter.

It meant being prepared to default on debt repayments and repudiate the debt when appropriate/necessary. The political preparation for debt repudiation had been powerfully delivered by the Debt Truth Committee (and it is clear from those who had been involved that those around Tsipras were not keen on the initiative) which had pointed out in its report that the Greek debt was illegitimate, illegal, and odious and that Greece had very right to refuse to pay it.

It meant being prepared to take control of key institutions of the capitalist state, in particular the banks and the financial sector including the Greek central bank. It meant the implementation of capital controls to protect the economy. It meant a big increase in taxes on the rich (on wealth and income) the top 10% and the top 1% in particular. It meant a big increase in taxes on the big companies. It meant cancelling the tax breaks to the shipping companies and the Orthodox Church.

It meant taking measures to revive consumption and reducing taxes on low incomes. It meant cutting the charges on a range of public services including public transport, electricity, and water. It meant an extensive plan for public for

job creation (green jobs in particular) along with a programme to rebuild the public services destroyed by years of austerity and to pave the way for carbon reduction and ecological transition.

These measures are in any case indivisible since taking control of the banks and the financial levers of power is "as far as the EU elites are concerned" incompatible with Eurozone membership. It was precisely the refusal of the Tsipras leadership to recognise this reality, or to contemplate taking such measures, that led to the absence of a plan B and to the remarkable and disastrous collapse.

Most of these ideas are not new of course. Many of these demands have been advocated and fought for by radical left and Marxist parties for many years. They are not and have never been some kind of dogma (or obsession) by such radical left parties (as some of their critics appear to think). When the confrontation with the capitalist state comes they are indispensable tools in the hands of the workers movement and can determine the outcome of the struggle.

The EU and radical left parties

Does the collapse of the Tsipras leadership in front of the EU elites and the Troika disprove (or diminish) the need for broad radical parties of the left such as Syriza previously represented in Greece or parties like the Red Green Alliance in Denmark or the Left Block in Portugal or LU in Britain. Absolutely not. In fact the totality of the Syriza experience confirms their importance.

The fact that Syriza was able to win an election, form a government, and put itself in a position to confront austerity with a mass movement behind it providing it was prepared to stay the course demonstrates their potential. No other left party has had this potential in the post-war period.

The fact that it failed to stay the course is to some extent a separate discussion. There is no guarantee that any party, or leadership, radical left (or revolutionary actually) will stay the course in such conditions of harsh and uncharted waters. That is what makes this discussion so important.

What it does call into question is the political positions of such parties on the key issues and the way they conduct themselves once in office. The key factor in this regard (though it is far from the only factor) was the issue of membership of the EU and in particular membership of the Eurozone. It was the threat of expulsion from the Eurozone which was cynically weaponised by the EU elites, that, more than any other factor brought the Tsipras leadership so dramatically to heel.

One thing (above all) is clear if it was not clear before. That it is impossible for a radical left government to oppose austerity inside the Eurozone today unless it is prepared to exit the Euro or be expelled from it if necessary.

Being a member of the Eurozone is to play by the rules of the Eurozone and nothing short of full compliance is acceptable to the elites. And all the key factors involved in conducting a struggle against the elites are bound up with Eurozone membership. The banks cannot be controlled and there can be no default on debt repayments, or debt repudiation, without violating EU and Eurozone rules and triggering the possibility of expulsion. In other words EU membership defined everything.

(Whether expulsion from the Eurozone would result in expulsion from the EU itself is unknown since not only has it not happened before but there is no provision for it in any of the EU treaties.)

Although Syriza was elected on a policy of no sacrifice for the Eurozone which implied fighting against austerity irrespective of expulsion threats by the elites this was never implemented by the Tsipras leadership in government. In fact Tsipras made staying in the Eurozone a strategic objective. He gave the impression that life outside of the Eurozone could not to be contemplated. It was a big mistake. In fact the only possibility of concessions from the elites he ever had was to call their bluff over expulsion and be prepared to see it through.

To oppose austerity inside the Eurozone today not only means being prepared to face down the threat of expulsion but preparing your supporters and your electoral base for that eventuality. This was never done. It also means ensuring that there is a coherent back-up system to provide solidarity in terms of food and other necessities in order to keep the economy going if this was going in a period of transition. The alternative to this is capitulation to the Troika and all that this entails in terms of, poverty, deprivation, social crisis, and humiliation.

This has been clear for a long time, however. I made the following points on the situation in Greece in the introduction to a pamphlet I wrote on the EU, entitled Behind the EU Crisis, in May 2012:

"The pamphlet argues that the key to a fight back in Greece and elsewhere is debt audit and debt repudiation. The refusal by the working class to take any responsibility for a debt which it did not create. In Greece it does not call directly for exit from the Eurozone but argues that in order to advocate debt repudiation you have to prepare for exit (or expulsion) from the Eurozone as a probable consequence. It insists that you cannot pursue an effective demand for debt repudiation if you advocate staying in the eurozone."

Transitional method and workers government

We have argued, throughout the crisis and confrontation in Greece, that the situation posed by it raised the possibility of a workers government. A government though taking office through a parliamentary election (with capitalism still intact) would act consistently in the interests of the working class even if that meant taking actions in order to defend itself and implement its programme that would be contrary to the capitalist mode of production and take it in a socialist direction. It was uncharted waters but it was a clear possibility.

This did not happen because the Syriza leadership capitulated on its key demand in fact its rationale for existence which was to oppose austerity. In fact what made it such a confrontation was that there was only event two basic options collapse or confront the threats (of bank closure and Eurozone expulsion) and begin to take control of the intuitions of the capitalist state.

Although the Tsipras leadership had begun to compromise on its programme as soon as it was in office (and even before), the Syriza Government retained the potential to move radically to the left whilst it maintained its anti-austerity stance. This was a stance that was totally unacceptable to the European elites and European capital. Anti-austerity was, as we have long argued, a transitional demand in the context of the struggle in Europe today.

The biggest single factor in the rise of Syriza, since 2012, had been its call for a government of the anti-austerity left which had found a huge resonance in the Greek working class. Both the KKE and Antarsya (to their shame) rejected the call.

Yet there was a clear objective need for such unity. A prolonged period of heightened class struggle: of strikes, protests, and mobilisations, that had made Greece the epicentre of struggle in Europe, had reached an impasse. A

new dynamic was needed that could only be provided by a governmental demand by a call for a government of the anti-austerity left. Years of hard fought class struggle had not resulted in the formation of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies and dual power on the streets, but in mass support for an anti-austerity government of the left parties via a parliamentary majority.

The debate around the formation of such a government (effectively a provisional government) under such conditions is not new, of course. It was discussed by the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1922, after the immediate revolutionary wave generated by the Russian revolution had receded and the Comintern had to come to terms with the reality that the struggle was going to be a much longer one and that struggles for power would not necessarily follow the soviet model.

The proposition advanced by the Comintern was that such a government elected to office with capitalism still existing could be the vehicle for developments beyond the limitations that capitalism, despite the restrictions which capitalism would attempt to impose on it irrespective of whether the leadership of such a government saw itself as playing such a role when it was elected to office. In other words it would be a transitional government.

The resolution on tactics at the Third Congress of the Comintern said the following. In fact it could have been written for the Greek situation today:

"As a general propagandistic slogan, the workers' government (or workers and peasants government [where peasants exist]) can be used almost anywhere. As an immediate political slogan, however, the workers' government is most important in countries where bourgeois society is particularly unstable, where the relationship of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the agenda as a practical problem requiring immediate solution. In these countries, the slogan of the workers' government flows unavoidably from the entire united-front tactic."

It goes on: "Such a workers' government is possible only if it is born from the struggles of the masses themselves and is supported by militant workers organisations created by the most oppressed layers of the working masses. Even a workers government that arises from a purely parliamentary combination, that is, one that is purely parliamentary in origin, can provide the occasion for a revival of the revolutionary workers movement. Obviously, the birth and continues existence of a genuine workers' government, one that pursues revolutionary policies, must result in a bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie, and possible civil war. Even an attempt by the proletariat to form such a workers' government will encounter from the outset the most determined resistance from the bourgeoisie. The slogan of the workers' government thus had the potential of uniting the proletariat and unleashing the revolutionary struggle."

Such a strategy would depend on an interaction between the mass movement in the work places and on the street where the mass movement pushes its representatives within government to implement an escalating series of radical demands that would in turn empower the mass movement. Demands which, however moderate (or reasonable) they may seem in themselves, will run up against the limits of that which capital will allow. It is from this process that institutions of workers democracy can emerge.

Challenging capitalism in this way would not be easy, of course, but there again, there is no easy way of challenging capitalism. Such a government would be faced with a stark choice. It could either take radical measures to defend itself and its mandate (i.e. move sharply to the left and challenge the capitalist institutions) or collapse and accept the conditions demanded by the elites. There was a strong leftwing current inside Syriza that would oppose such a collapse and a mass movement on the streets that would back them up.

To defend such a government under these conditions would have required not only require a mass movement in

Greece but the development of solidarity action across Europe. It implied the building of radical left parties across Europe to prepare for such a situation.

Eurocommunism

When it comes to the political factors behind the capitulation, the factor that stands out above all others is attitude to the EU, and the Eurozone, and the influence Eurocommunism and left Europeanism in this regard. Tsipras comes from the Eurocommunist wing of Synaspismos, the biggest single component of Syriza, of which he was a central leader.

Eurocommunism is the most dangerous of these trends because it is linked directly (historically) to a reformist perspective. It has its origins in the reaction of a number of Western European CPs to the Soviet repression of the Prague spring in 1968. In turning away from Moscow, they decided that socialism could be achieved without a revolutionary break with the existing institutions of the capitalist state –that they could work within the framework of Western democracy and co-operate with its institutions.

This was spelled out most clearly by Santiago Carrillo, leader of the PCE (CP) in the Spanish state. He said “in his book *Eurocommunism and the State* published in 1977 that the aim was to: “Elaborate a solid conception of the possibility of democratising the apparatus of the capitalist state, transforming it into a valid tool for constructing a socialist society, without needing to destroy it radically by force”. This task is to be achieved, he said, without becoming “identified with social-democracy”.

Eurocommunism was then given a new lease of life with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Stalinists parties at the end of the 1980s when many of them, led by the Spanish, French and Italian parties embraced it with enthusiasm. Some converted directly into social democratic parties. In 1991 the Italian PCI, the biggest CP in Western Europe, dissolved and became the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) an explicitly social democratic party which then morphed further into a fully neoliberal organisation.

Rifondazione Comunista emerged as a radical left party in reaction to this. It played a major role in the mass mobilisations of the late 1990s and the early 2000s, particularly the Genoa mass mobilisation in 2001 around the G8 summit. It went into sharp decline after it entered the Prodi government (in fact the cabinet) in 2006.

In Greece, Eurocommunism developed in the 1970s when the Greek CP (the KKE) split into two separate parties: the KKE of the “interior” and the KKE of the “exterior”. The “exterior” denoted a pro-Moscow orientation whilst “interior” denoted a break with Moscow and a Eurocommunist orientation.

Synaspismos was formed as an electoral alliance between the two parties. In the early 1990s, however, the pro-Moscow KKE pulled out of the alliance and purged its membership of Eurocommunists and Synaspismos became an independent organisation.

It became heavily involved in the rise of the anti-globalisation movement at the end of the 1990s, and the Genoa mobilisation in particular, and it evolved into a diverse organisation embracing a number of traditions –including Eurocommunism as its strongest wing. Tsipras comes from that wing of the party. He became its president in 2008 when he stood for mayor of Athens.

Left europeanism

Left europeanism is a leftist view of the EU that criticises its austerity agenda, its racism, and its lack of democracy but fails (or refuses) to recognise the full extent of the reactionary anti-working class role that it is designed to play. It sees the EU as progressive in relation to the individual member states, and seeks its reform rather than its demise. On the EU it is influenced by some of the ideas of Eurocommunism without sharing its worldview or reformist framework.

Some of the radical left parties in Europe see the EU as progressive as against the member states and have a perspective of working within it and seeking to reform it from within and so can be called left europeanist. The Scottish Socialist Party recently published a pamphlet on the EU referendum that specifically calls for the EU to be reformed from within, reversing its previous view. This is reflected in Die Linke and Podemos for example. The leaders of both of these parties have supported Tsipras in his decision to sign the deal on the basis that he had no alternative.

In Britain, in recent years, the left has been more pro-EU today than at any time since the EU was established—although there has been a marked change since the role of the EU in Greece has become clear. Virtually the whole of the left, led by the Labour left, and the bulk of the unions, campaigned for EU exit in 1975. Today the unions are overwhelmingly pro-EU—despite their current tactical position over Cameron's ambitions to opt out of the Social Chapter and the Working Time directive.

The Greens have always been pro-EU, though they opposed the Maastricht Treaty in the 1990s. Today they are more pro-EU than ever. The SNP and Plaid are the same—partly because both Scotland and Wales see themselves as beneficiaries of EU regional development assistance. The radical left is not immune from this ether.

Both of these political trends—Eurocommunism and left europeanism—are seriously problematic under today's conditions as demonstrated in Greece. Eurocommunism much more so.

Nationalistic opposition to the EU

Not all opposition to the EU from the left is progressive. We can take, for example, the KKE in Greece and the CPB in Britain, who seek credibility from their opposition to Eurocommunism and left europeanism. The KKE's dogmatic and nationalistic demands for exit in Greece whatever the conditions and consequences (ignoring the reality of public opinion on the ground) were as damaging in preparing the Greece population to deal with the threats of expulsion when they came as the refusal of the Syriza leadership to contemplate EU exit as a point of principle.

The right approach in Greece (as argued above) was the one Syriza had but abandoned, which was no sacrifice for the Euro—in other words total opposition to austerity but preparing the population for the confrontation that would result and the exit if it came. In other words winning the population to a position of exit whilst fighting to defend their living standards than on the basis of some nationalist defence of sovereignty.

In Britain the CPB—which is the Pro-Moscow side of the split with the Eurocommunist Democrat Left in the early 1990s has similar politics. They promoted NO2EU in the European elections from a little Englander/defend British sovereignty, perspective. Their main partners in this were the late Bob Crow (and the RMT) and the Socialist Party.

Conclusion

A wide discussion on all this could hardly be more urgent. Politics is becoming more volatile across Europe. The crisis remains unresolved. Austerity is being forced in relentlessly. Jeremy Corbin's election as Labour leader is a reflection of this. Whether it is Podemos in Spain or some broad based party that does not yet exist there will be more parties with a mass radicalisation behind them, that will be thrown into this situation and will face all these problems and challenges all over again.

The European workers movement cannot afford another debacle such as the one that had been created in Greece by the leadership of Syriza.

[1] This text was agreed by the National Committee of Socialist Resistance on September 13 2015.