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Greece

The role of the left in Syriza

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This contribution was made by Sotiris Martalis during the debate on broad parties at the March 2013 meeting of the Fourth International's International Committee.

I bring you fraternal salutations from the DEA, the Internationalist Workers' Left Organisation, which forms part of Syriza.

I want to begin by clarifying a point: I do not intend in my contribution to provide a "model solution" to the question of the so-called broad parties. I will try, with the little time I have, to describe the difficulties we face and the manner in which we respond to them within Syriza.

So there are six points that I want to highlight:

1. Syriza has a history going back more than a decade. Its foundation, in 2001, was the result of the conjugation of two elements. The first rested on the unity of action between revolutionaries and reformists in the movement against the effects of capitalist globalization. The second concerned the search for electoral alliances by the left reformist party Synaspismos, because of its weakness. This party risked not reaching the threshold of 3% necessary to enter the Greek parliament.

These two elements gave us the possibility of implementing a united front tactic. I use the term "united front tactic" because in reality, because of the difference in size between the reformists and the radical left, we cannot speak of a United Front in the traditional sense of the term, in the sense of that employed in the 1920s or 1930s.

During the last decade, Syriza has gone through numerous different phases. Unity of action in the movements, support to movements like that which succeeded in 2007 in blocking the efforts to change the Constitution to allow the privatization of the universities or again the youth revolt "which took place in a climate of corruption, diversion of public money and the beginning of a social crisis" in December 2008, with the killing of a young student aged 15: Alexandros Grigoropoulos.

The coalition has also known divisions as during the elections to the European parliament in 2004 or during the national elections in 2010. These divisions took place when the reformist leadership attempted to create an alliance with the social democratic PASOK.

Syriza cannot then constitute a model if we consider this coalition of independent forces (with their newspapers, their functioning) outside of the context of the social and political movement of resistance. As well as the political place won by the left in Greece. The latter "and I speak of the left, not the centre left" represents around 33 % of votes (Syriza, KKE, "the Communist Party" and Antarsya "the Front of the Anti-capitalist Left). There are moreover around 45 radical anti-capitalist organisations.

2. If we want to explain Syriza's success, we should keep in mind that the working class in Greece has waged many struggles in recent years to defeat the policies of the dominant class: more than 29 general strikes (or one day strikes) "there of them of more than 48 hours" the occupation of administrative buildings, the movement of the Greek indignant who occupied the parks (including Syntagma square in Athens), the "We will not pay!" movement against unjust taxes or price increases of public transports, and taxes to use the motorways and privatized roads and so on.

In spite of a fallback in struggles, in late 2012 and early 2013, we should not forget the significant struggles involving metro workers and seafarers, peasants in the streets during a general strike on February 20 as well as the decision already taken for a strike in education in early March. We should also mention the movements which brought down two governments: that of PASOK of Georges Papandréou Jr as well as that of the technocrat and financier Lucas Papademos.

Despite this, it is true that the social movement of resistance has not succeeded in reversing the policy of the dominant class. That is why it sought to do this in the situation that presented itself in May and June 2012, through the ballot box. The working people used Syriza to this end as a “tool”, and not the KKE which had recorded votes twice as high as Syriza previously.

Three reasons lie behind this:

“ Syriza was active in the movement (unlike the KKE which applied a profoundly sectarian policy);

“ Syriza provided a political alternative “ by its demand for a left government;

“ and finally it called for left unity, in particular a unity between Syriza, the KKE and Antarsya, beyond divergences and starting from the needs expressed by the popular majority.

We should also not forget that during the inter-election period [from May to June 2012], Syriza firmly resisted all pressure to join a government of “national salvation” with the bourgeois parties.

3. It seems currently that in addition to the struggles, Syriza is the political instrument that working people will use. An elementary error made by the comrades of the KKE and Antarsya resides in the fact that they see the left government as a force which will simply manage capitalism. They use the example of the management and specific defeat for the left of AKEL (Progressive Party of the Working People) in Cyprus in the February, 2013, elections which marked a defeat for Dimitris Christofias (AKEL) faced with the right represented by Nicos Anastasiades.

Unlike AKEL and other centre left parties, Syriza has argued for this transitional objective of a left government “ in the specific situation of Greece “ on the basis of a programmatic agreement concerning the cancellation of the Memorandums (the three austerity plans concocted by the Troika and a sector of the Greek dominant classes) and on the overthrow of the policies of the dominant class.

The discussion should, consequently, be on the conditions which should allow us to attain the objective of a left government as result of a wave of struggles while keeping in mind the fact that such a government is not a final objective, but a transitional step which will strengthen the confidence in themselves of the wage earners and their allies and the power of the workers in struggle.

4. It is obvious that the reformist leadership of Synaspismos has an approach which envisages the constitution of a left government as the result above all of purely electoral tactics. That is why it adapts to the so called realist pressure and tries to win votes by approaching the social democratic political sectors, more exactly those originating from a social liberal politics.

With the aim of conducting a clear transparent and loyal opposition to this tactic we founded at the last conference of Syriza the Left Platform (which brings together the “left current” of Synaspismos and the forces of the Rproject), creating a left opposition supported by 27% of votes inside Syriza.

Rproject represents a quarter of the Left Platform. It amounts to a “red” network of activists and organizations which leads struggles not only in the national political field but also inside the local structures of Syriza and the workplaces, as well as in the trade unions where reorganization is taking place under the blows of the economic crisis and the government. Rproject tries to build an assembly of forces sufficient to constitute an obstacle to the adaptations and oscillations of the reformist-oriented leadership of Syriza.

Our basic programme for Syriza is:

• unilateral cancellation of the memorandums as well as the cancellation of the loan agreements, the overthrow of all the austerity laws;

• the increase of wages and pensions in the limits which take account of the breadth of the crisis; in defence of the public schools and hospitals;

• nationalisation of the banks and the renationalization • under popular control • of the big public enterprises which have already been privatized (like for example a strategic part of the port of Piraeus in the hands of the Chinese enterprise COSCO);

• high taxation of capital;

• a fight for the retrocession of capital which has fled the country;

• control of capital flows.

It amounts in fact to a transitional programme opening the possibility for the working class and its allies to win a decided majority, practically, to advance in the direction of the overthrow of capitalism in a socialist perspective which should emerge with more precision during the struggles and debates which should accompany them at the national and at the least the European scale.

5. The main difference with the comrades of Antarsya (a coalition of groups which obtained 0.33% of the vote in June 2012) is based on the fact that Syriza does not support an exit from the Euro zone or the European Union.

Their main argument is that the Euro constitutes the political instrument of the dominant class. We think that Syriza holds a more correct position: “Not a single sacrifice for the Euro”. Leave aside the fact that a minority sector of the dominant class supports the exit from the euro zone hoping that through a devaluation of the currency it can reduce still further the value of labour power.

Also, can anyone give me the example of a currency which is not a political instrument in the hands of the dominant class? I do not even want to insist on the effects of an exit from the euro in favour of capitalist sectors with significant funds outside Greece and of the various effects on the working class, small peasants and so on.

The left should begin the difficult combat against austerity and not enclose itself in the dilemmas (euro or drachma) of the dominant class. If in addition we should come out of the Euro, it is only by a powerful movement of defence of wages and pensions and this by a politics which involves a process of extending beyond Greece and synchronizing, in different forms and rhythms, with the other so-called countries of the periphery and by drawing links with the most combative sectors of the German and French working class among others.

6. My final point concerns the fight against the fascists, the neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn. This amounts to a significant front of struggle. The essential point is that the fascists have failed "at least up until now" to win the streets, the public area, apart from specific actions. But that depends on one fact: it is necessary that the mass initiative remains in the hands of the left, which has succeeded, for now, in responding by unity of action in this area (with the exception, once again, of the KKE which acts in a sectarian and separate manner, although debates have begun within it).

The struggle is common at the international and European scale and where the chain is broken will be created the conditions to reach a more credible European left. If the weak link is Greece, I hope that we will respond aptly there to win the first stage which will require a massive solidarity to be consolidated.