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Greek elections

Spectacular stakes in the Greek elections

- Debate - Perspectives in Greece -

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It looks increasingly likely that Syriza could produce a spectacular result on Sunday - even more spectacular than on May 6 - and win enough support to form a government. This is by no means guaranteed but it is looking a real possibility.

Since the PASOK vote has collapsed, Syriza has to beat the right-wing New Democracy (ND) and become the single biggest party. It would then receive the 50 top-up Deputies (under the Greek electoral system) and could seek to form a Government. If successful this would be a political earthquake - a historic development not only in Greece but right across Europe.

The choices in the election can hardly be more stark in what is clearly the most significant class confrontation in Europe since the Portuguese revolution of 1975. The main choice is between a ND-led austerity government of the right and a Syriza-led anti-austerity government of the left - a workers government in Marxist parlance. And this when ND is moving further to the right under pressure from the fascist Golden Dawn party.

The other possibility (which is a real danger) is a second inconclusive result. This could open the door to some kind of 'Euros' technocratic' administration - which would not be technocratic but a neo-liberal administration imposed by the EU elites and acting on their behalf.

So the situation could hardly be clearer. Either a 'Euros' technocratic' administration or a ND-led government would result in even more brutal attacks on the working class whilst a Syriza-led government would reject austerity and be an inspiration to the left and the workers movement across Europe.

Under such conditions you would think that unity behind Syriza would be a monumental no-brainer - but as we have seen it does not work that way on the Greek left.

Other sections of the left, the Stalinist KKE and the smaller Antarsya, still (scandalously) continue to refuse to support Syriza. They prefer instead to spend their time either denouncing it for its alleged inadequacies or pointing to the mistakes and capitulations they predict it will make if it takes office.

This is a dangerous game and an object lesson in the role of ultra-left sectarianism when real opportunities open up for the workers movement. It means we could see an anti-austerity government either denied office or opposed once in office by other sections of the left!

The KKE is the most virulent in this. They have rejected all appeals for the unity of the left out of hand both with regard to the elections on May 6 and now those on June 17. They denounce Syriza as social democratic and social democracy as the biggest enemy. They refuse to support a Syriza government because they say it will not immediately smash capitalism. They argue that if Syriza were to form a government without smashing the capitalist state they would be effectively a coalition with the Greek bourgeoisie even if no bourgeois politicians were involved. They claim (falsely) that it wants to stay in the Euro at all costs when the most important thing is to exit from it.

Whilst there are ambiguities in Syriza's position on the Euro and the EU itself, they are dealing with a sharply contradictory situation amongst Greek voters. Whilst a big majority are against austerity they are also in favour of staying within the Eurozone - which are incompatible positions. Therefore whilst Syriza does not call for exit from the Euro (they even on occasions say that that they would like to stay in) they also present as a central slogan 'no sacrifice for the Euro' - which is incompatible with membership of the Eurozone. They go on to advance a

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series of demands, which are equally incompatible with it. The effect of this stance is to put the ball in the court of the EU elites. If they want Greece outside of the Eurozone they have to expel it.

In any case, the Euro, as a currency, despite its class character and the role it has played in the EU crisis itself, would be the wrong battleground on which to fight. The struggle will be won or lost on the question of austerity not the currency! The crucial thing is that Syriza prepares itself and its supporters for the consequences of its stance on the Euro.

Whilst the Antarsya coalition is less sectarian than the KKE, and does not share its politics, it also rejects left unity and defends an isolationist stance. In fact from an electoral point of view this could be more damaging than the stance of the KKE since even if the KKE vote declines further, as is likely, it will still meet the 3% threshold and its votes will translate into KKE deputies. Antarsya on the other hand, which has no chance of reaching the 3% threshold, will be throwing its votes away to no effect at all.

Consequently if the difference between a rightwing and a leftwing government is Antarsya's votes, which could have gone to Syriza, it will have a lot to answer for.

Shamefully Antarsya's stance is fully supported by the SWP at the international level. It means that the SWP has no governmental slogan at a time when a government of radical left parties is a real possibility. Alex Callinicos argues (bafflingly) that the most important struggles will come after the election - by which time a right-wing government might have been elected!

Antarsya refuses to support Syriza because, they say, because its platform is not a full revolutionary programme. Charlie Kimber, the SWP's national secretary, takes this further (even more bafflingly) by arguing that in Greece today Antarsya are the Bolsheviks and Syriza are the Mensheviks!

This is despite the fact - as has been said elsewhere in this debate - that Syriza refused to join a bourgeois coalition after the May 6 elections whereas the Mensheviks joined a platform with the liberal bourgeois Cadet party even before the election had taken place. Far from having a policy which resembles the Bolsheviks the Antarsya (and the KKE) appear to stand aside with their arms folded waiting to say 'Euros told you so' if Syriza goes belly up. The narratives of betrayal are already being rehearsed.

Such an approach is wrong on all counts. The burning issue at the moment is not whether Syriza will make mistakes if it is elected - it seems inconceivable that it will not - but whether it will be elected at all! Moreover if Antarsya, or other sections of the Greek left, want to ensure that Syriza stands firm then standing on the side lines and predicting disaster is certainly not the best way of going about it! Functioning inside Syriza, or standing in solidarity with it would be a far more effective approach.

In any case to argue that Syriza should be putting forward a full revolutionary programme before the conditions exists for this makes no sense. It is the road to marginalisation.

What is needed today is a radical anti-austerity programme which corresponds to the current stage of the struggle - and the basis for this already exists in Syriza's manifesto for June 17. The key pledges advanced in it are the following: repudiate the austerity package, reverse the cuts, and freeze the debt - alongside much more of course. A more extensive programme is something that can and must be developed as the struggle advances, not counterposed to the needs of the current stage.

What exists is Greece today (before the election) is not a pre-revolutionary situation, though it has some elements of it. There is a naked class confrontation but as yet no elements of alternative power. In fact some of the Greek employers are already by-passing their own political representation and issuing direct threats to their workforce as to

the consequences for their jobs if they vote for Syriza.

A pre-revolutionary situation, however, could quickly emerge if Syriza is elected and implements its programme. Emergency measures would have to be taken to defend the new government. Crucial measures would involve, nationalising the banks, imposing capital controls, taxing the rich, cancelling internally held public debt, freezing the assets of the wealthy to stop them being moved out of country. The task at the present time is to prepare for such a situation not to indulge in leftist posturing.

Of course there are dangers that Syriza might collapse under the pressures which will be heaped upon it. It would be in uncharted waters and there can be no guarantee of success. There is however a guarantee of failure - that is to leave Syriza isolated (or worse) in the face of the onslaught.

Until now, however, Syriza has resisted the pressures heaped upon it remarkably well. In fact it has not only stood firm but has been radicalising to the left since the May 6 election. It has remained fully committed to its anti-austerity pledges. It refused to contemplate a coalition with any of the bourgeois parties and it has made no concessions on austerity. It has resisted pressures, both to join a national unity government and to moderate its program. It also has a very radical (and radicalising) working class base which would be very hostile to any back-sliding.

Moreover Syriza's leaders appear to be acutely aware of the scale of the task ahead. It has been holding popular assemblies in city squares across Greece to extend its support and prepare for the battles ahead. It is transforming itself from a coalition into a political party not simply in order to meet the electoral laws and get the bonus deputies but also to organise more effectively and prepare for government.

Alexis Tsipras has also talked about the need to unite with other radical parties across Europe. He clearly feels that a Syriza government would not be able to survive if it won the election, implemented its programme, and nothing else happened across Europe. Such a situation, however, is unlikely, even unthinkable.

In fact the EU is already facing economic Armageddon. We have just seen Spain given a 100bn Euro bailout to no effect at all. Italy is next. A Syriza victory followed by the repudiation of the austerity package would rock the EU to its foundations. Contagion would spread across the continent potentially radicalising the left and create new political situations in a number of countries, particularly on the periphery. This could well be the situation under which a Syriza government would fight its battles and break its isolation. It could open up a radically new situation and a confrontation between workers and capital unseen in many years in Western Europe.

In this context the stakes for the left internationally could hardly be higher.

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