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Greece

A few remarks on the question of government

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The depth of the capitalist crisis poses the question of power in general terms – to break with austerity requires a radical change of policy and another government - but the Greek crisis, combining as it does socio-economic collapse, political crisis and social resistance, thrusts it directly in the forefront of the social and political scene.

An old debate

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the question of government – workers' government, workers' and peasants' government, popular government - has been one of the issues at the centre of the strategic discussion in the workers' movement. This discussion rebounded after the Russian Revolution, when the Communist International discussed the perspective of a "workers' and peasants' government" distinct from the "dictatorship of the proletariat" identified with the power of the workers. There was a genuine debate about whether a workers' and peasants' government was simply synonymous with this dictatorship of the proletariat or was in fact proposing a governmental formula which, in the heat of the crisis, would be intermediate between the power of the bourgeoisie in crisis and the revolutionary working-class upsurge.

At the time, the majority of the International chose to experiment with this type of government. It was a question of defining the first steps towards a break with the bourgeoisie and the programme of a transitional government between a capitalist power which was collapsing and a working-class power that was emerging from the revolutionary crisis: an "already no longer" bourgeois power, in general a bourgeois state in the process of dislocation, and a "not yet" workers' power.

This discussion had started in Russia, when the Bolsheviks proposed a government emanating from dual power in the spring of 1917, a government of the soviets, a socialist-revolutionary/Menshevik government before the seizure of power by the soviets and the formation of a Bolshevik government. It continued, in the light of the revolutionary experiences in Germany in the 1920s during the German revolution and in Spain in the 1930s during the Spanish revolution: a government responsible to the workers' councils of Saxony-Thuringia, in Germany in 1923; the Central Committee of the militias in Catalonia between July and September 1936.

In the 1920s in France, in a situation that was not directly revolutionary, Trotsky also evoked this perspective of a workers' government in the form of a government of a Socialist-Communist majority that could emerge from the mass struggle, but also from an election victory. While considering that "a workers' government can result from a "parliamentary beginning of the revolution", "it is the slogan of a massive movement of the proletariat counterposing the idea of its own government to all the bourgeois parliamentary combinations". (Trotsky).

In the 1930s, he defended a Socialist-Communist government on the basis of a system of transitional demands. It must be understood that in the 1930s, the differences between revolutionaries and reformists were in the context of the declared objective of the overthrow of capitalism. Trotsky believed then that "the crisis of humanity is concentrated in the crisis of leadership of the workers' movement. He also thought that a change of leadership of the workers' movement under the pressure of events was possible, even though "the social-democratic leaderships went over after the war of 1914-1918 to the side of the bourgeois order" and that Stalinism had become definitively bankrupt in the struggle against Hitler in Germany. He was convinced that the workers' movement could no longer count on these leaderships, but that it could still rely on the propulsive force of the Russian revolution, which stimulated working-class radicalization, despite Stalinism.

With hindsight there were certainly also illusions in the workers' movement at that time: the strength of the movement would be such in the whirlwind of the war-revolution that the leaderships of the Socialist and Communist parties "could go further than they would like". These governmental formulas were taken up again in the period after the war and in the 1970s, when revolutionaries demanded that the Socialist and Communist parties take power to ensure the satisfaction of demands.

But after the Second World War, the situation changed: social-democratic and Stalinist bureaucratic domination stabilized and crystallized, both in their dealings with the union bureaucracies and in parliamentary institutions. The formulas of governments of the Socialist and Communist parties to implement an anti-capitalist programme had the advantage of giving a credible government perspective but the disadvantage of distilling illusions about the ability of these parties to ensure the beginning of a break with the bourgeoisie.

Beyond these historical experiences, it should be remembered that the discussion on these transitional governments is linked to moments of acute crisis - socio-economic, political - when the political crisis is exceptional and the upsurge of the masses is equally so. This discussion came back in a very sharp way in France in May 1968 and in Portugal in 1974-1975. In May 1968, the French Communist Party (PCF) opposed the popular revolt: all forms of government including the PCF or the social-democratic formations were rejected or discarded by the movement.

The young revolutionaries of the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR) put forward then the demand for the departure of De Gaulle and the call for a "popular government" based on all the organizations in the May movement: assemblies, committees, unions. In Portugal, in 1974, the carnation revolution put on the agenda the liquidation of the dictatorship, the election of a constituent assembly and, very quickly, the construction of a new power. Many revolutionary organizations, each in its own way, put the accent on a government relying on the mobilization of the masses, self-organization and the revolutionary sectors of the army.

A historical change

We have a new historical situation, where the transformation of social democracy into social liberalism historically condemns any form of alliance or government with Socialist parties. These parties, "more and more bourgeois and less and less working-class", directly support the austerity policies of liberal capitalism. Although the existence of a popular base of these parties makes necessary policies of unity in action when the situation allows it, it is first and foremost unity with the Socialist trade union activists in the workplaces and with the voters.

Parliamentary or governmental alliances are unacceptable - this is the core of our disagreement with the Left Front in France and more particularly with the PCF. Admittedly, the dominant parties of the Left Front do not participate in the government and often vote against bills of the Socialist Party, which creates the conditions for joint action. But by refusing to position themselves as a "left opposition" to the government of Hollande-Ayrault, they reaffirm, at the same time, that they are part of the parliamentary majority and that they are working for the reorientation of this majority with the social liberals. We have a radical disagreement with this approach. Social democracy transformed into social liberalism has removed itself from a possible governmental equation for social transformation. This is a historic change in relation to the terms in which the question was posed during a good part of the twentieth century.

An "algebraic formula"

But a question is directly posed to us: if you are fighting the Hollande government what do you suggest instead? How

many times has Olivier Besancenot been asked these questions? They are questions that flow from the depth of the crisis and the feeling that exists in the country against austerity policies. This poses the question of government, without giving us a concrete formula.

Trotsky discusses this question in his writings on France in the 1920s. "The workers' government is an algebraic formula, in other words a formula to whose terms no numeric values are fixed. Hence its advantages and also its disadvantages". And he goes on: "advantages as a unitary political perspective of the whole workers' movement. Disadvantages in a purely parliamentary interpretation of this slogan". We must therefore be careful, but this does not lead Trotsky to rule out the perspective. On the contrary.

All the formulas of "workers' government", "popular government" or more specifically "government against austerity" are therefore general - algebraic - formulas which give a first response to the question of power. We define them by their tasks. In this case the implementation of emergency measures, which are vital for the population (employment, wages, public services), policies of funding of these emergency programmes by the cancellation of the illegitimate debt, an anti-capitalist taxation policy and a first reorganization of property by taking over banks and key sectors of the economy. To begin to implement this programme, we must put an end to the present "austerity governments" and rely on the mobilization of the peoples. It is the situation and policy of each left organization or social movement that will determine what organizations will be likely to participate in or support a government in the service of the workers.

This general propaganda prepares the ground for intervention in major crises, where the governmental formula will take on a concrete meaning.

Once again on Syriza's government of the Lefts

This is where the Greek situation has a particular dimension. Because, to our knowledge, this is the only country where the perspective of government is no longer just general and where it is not only a question of propaganda. In Greece, the acuteness of the crisis, as a national crisis, is such that the question of government can be posed, concretely, "in fixed terms" as Trotsky put it. This is the only case in Europe where a party/coalition of the radical Left has achieved an electoral result of more than 25 per cent, where the Left as a whole has more than 35 per cent, which can make it possible for it to win a parliamentary majority and therefore pose the question of government. The next elections are due in 2015, but the crisis is such that we cannot rule out early elections.

It is in this context that the proposal for a "government of the Lefts" takes on its full importance. Of course, there are issues around the definition of this government and its programme. The points of equilibrium are under discussion between the different currents of Syriza. The formulations vary depending on this or that declaration. But, at this stage, Syriza continues to advocate "a government of the Lefts who are opposed to the memoranda of austerity policies of the government and the Troika". This proposal should be made clearer in the following directions, which is what the left of Syriza is trying to do:

- * A government of the Lefts, that is to say of Syriza, the KKE, Antarsya and left personalities and not a government of national salvation or of class alliances.
- * An anti-austerity government, which refuses any sacrifice for the euro, defends all the vital demands of the population and begins an anti-capitalist transition: nationalization of the banks and key sectors of the economy under social control.
- * A government which comes from from a mass mobilization to overthrow the present Samaras government and which creates the conditions for a social relationship of forces in favour of the popular movement.
- * This "government of the Lefts", is only a moment in a strategy of struggle against austerity.

A few remarks on the question of government

To satisfy the vital demands, a confrontation with the ruling classes and the EU will be necessary. Such a government must deepen measures for an anti-capitalist break and lay the foundations of social control and of elements of popular power in towns, cities and workplaces.

These issues are under debate in Syriza. At this stage, the left reformist currents remain on an anti-austerity line, which creates the conditions for the joint action of all the forces of Syriza. But their horizon remains limited to a left government in the existing institutions and a return to the equilibrium of before the crisis. Once again, a "government of the Lefts" may have, on the basis of an electoral victory, a parliamentary beginning, but it can only seriously combat austerity by starting a radical transformation of the economy and of politics, by creating the conditions for a new power. This is a possible transition; it is not the point of arrival. This is the meaning of our support to this proposal. The problems of an anti-capitalist break, of a dismantling of the old state institutions and of the creation of the conditions for a new power are not only theoretical issues. They can quickly become critical issues. They remain the blind spot of the leadership of Syriza. They remind us that, beyond lack of foresight and unexplored trails, there is a definite functionality to the strategic debate between reform and revolution.

There is and there will be discussion on all these issues. All hypotheses are open: the continuation of the current parliamentary and governmental combination; but also a sudden worsening of the crisis with a polarization between, on the one hand, the fascist offensive and/or an authoritarian regime under the pressure of the military, and on the other, a social and political radicalization.

In this situation, the leadership of Syriza may yield to the pressures of the ruling classes and the European Union.

But another hypothesis can also be retained: a fierce resistance of the Greek people and of Syriza which finds the forces for an anti-austerity government. Of course, such a government will be "in dispute" between forces which express the pressures of the dominant classes and other forces which reflect the pressures of the movement from below; such forces exist in Syriza, in its left but also in sectors of its leadership. Let us not forget that "in exceptional circumstances - crisis, crash, war - all the political forces of the Left can go further than they originally envisaged", (Trotsky, in the *Transitional Programme* of 1938). Above all, and this is a big difference, bureaucratic crystallization is not as strong in Syriza as it is in the leaderships of the Communist parties of Europe.

In any case, a victory, even partial, in Greece will be, at this stage, the combination of a radicalization and of a consistent anti-austerity policy of Syriza. Defeat is also possible, but the role of revolutionaries is not to denounce Syriza, in anticipation of possible betrayals tomorrow. On the contrary, it is to support it against the austerity policies and to do everything possible to strengthen the anti-capitalist dimension of its struggle. Because, let us say it clearly: a defeat of Syriza would also be our defeat.