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Greece

When will workers start the next act in Greece?

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Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his government are preparing to confront a new round of protests and strikes as the European authorities—often referred to as the Troika of the European Union (EU), European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF)—demand even deeper cuts on top of the drastic austerity measures of the third Memorandum that Tsipras agreed to last July. The mass support that Tsipras and the remnants of the radical SYRIZA has been crumbling since the September 2015 election after the party's left wing was driven out and formed the core of the new organization Popular Unity.

Antonis Davanellos is a leading member of the Internationalist Workers Left (DEA, by its initials in Greek) and the Red Network, which are both part of Popular Unity. In this article, first published in DEA's press, then in French at the A l'encontre website, and translated here by Todd Chretien, analyzes the escalating antagonisms, inside and outside the government.

Greece's Council of Political Leaders was convened on March 4 by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras who heads a Greek government determined to apply every deadly austerity demand made by the international institutions—known as the Troika—along with the core of Greek capital.

However, Tsipras may face an internal crisis within his executive leadership at the end of March when a whole collection of laws is rolled out, including social security reform, a new employment law, regressive taxes, and so on.

The Council brought together representatives of all the parliamentary parties under the chairmanship of Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos, a member of the conservative New Democracy (ND). M

ore than a year ago, Pavlóoulos was elected president of the Greek republic by a parliament controlled by SYRIZA, with only a single dissenting vote cast against him—that of Ionna Gañtani, then a member of SYRIZA and of DEA. The significance of Pavlóoulos' appointment was confirmed by the evolution of the SYRIZA leadership and of its governing apparatus.

A meeting of the Council of Political Leaders is usually convened to deal with particularly important matters. Officially, the agenda will take up the refugee crisis. In reality, everyone knows that the real object of discussion was the attempt to come to a consensus about much more among key players.

There are many predictions being made that the government could seek to enlarge its parliamentary base beyond SYRIZA and ANEL [the Independent Greeks, according to its initials in Greek, a right-wing party that has been part of the governing coalition with SYRIZA since it took office in January 2015]—an expansion that could take the form of a government of national unity [including the participation of ND, a former ruling party] if there is a sense that the political situation might lead to a loss of control.

Only a few months after his triumphant showing in the September 2015 elections, Tsipras was forced to turn to the defeated parties to ask for their help. In this way, he is being forced to admit that he cannot overcome Greece's deep social and political crisis.

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The government's credibility and its composition are disintegrating at an accelerated rate as it faces a two-pronged dilemma.

On the one hand, the government is encountering difficulties in implementing the third Memorandum [a package of austerity measures demanded by the creditors that the SYRIZA government accepted last year].

On the other, it is faced with the refugee crisis as well as conflicts in its relations with NATO, Turkey and within its own army that it is incapable of responding to in even a minimally satisfactory manner. Instead, the government is organizing camps for the refugees, as far from urban centers as possible, surrounded and guarded by the army and other forces. All this to prepare for tourist season—which is a very important part of the Greek economy—in May!

But for the many solidarity actions carried out by the public, which has substituted itself for the failure of responsible institutions to act, the refugees would find themselves in even more dire conditions. This concrete solidarity has created an obstacle to any attempt by the Nazis of Golden Dawn to exploit the crisis. Golden Dawn's presence has only been notable in the north of Greece, where it finds a hearing around the "Macedonian Question"—that is, where nationalism is historically the sharpest.

The first test that confronted Tsipras since the mutilation of SYRIZA with the signing of the July 13, 2015, agreement with the creditors, was the obligation to apply the savage counter-reforms to the social security system. The main effect of these cuts, put forward by Minister of Labor Georgios Katrougalos, would result in the final disintegration of the public social security system, and, therefore, lay the basis for the entry of private firms into the pension and health care sectors.

These proposals provoked large demonstrations from farmers and some of the liberal professions, which were quite evidently meant to be the measure's first victims. The government has tried—and they are extremely anxious about this—to avoid mobilizations by workers, especially in the wake of the very successful February 4 general strike, promising that workers' pensions will not be touched. Everyone knows this promise is bogus.

For the moment, we are in between such mobilizations. The leaders of the farmers and liberal professionals relented after receiving promises of dialogue from Tsipras.

Here, the position of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) plays a very important role. The party voted in favor of the general strike inside the unions, but proposed moving it to a later date. This gave the government time to maneuver in order to prepare for the end of March deadlines.

The role that the KKE played in the farmers' disputes was worse. It accepted Tsipras' offer to participate in the dialogue and proposed halting the mobilizations in order to wait for his response...later. Once again, this shows why we believe that each political force in Greece must be judged by its actions, not its statements.

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Be that as it may, everyone knows that the "intermission" between struggles will be brief. The government must present its social security law by the end of March or the beginning of April at the latest. And from that moment on, it will have to confront, once again, a generalized mobilization.

The worst problem facing Tsipras is that the creditors are asking for more and more cuts as the European economic crisis intensifies. The Troika is demanding further pension reductions—it actually characterizes them as "too

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generous"â€”while the IMF says the condition of its continued participation in the "aid program" for Greece is additional measures equivalent to cuts of 7.5 to 9 billion euros, including cuts in the already miserable minimum wage!

It will be very difficult for the SYRIZA governmentâ€”despite all the contradictions between its rhetoric and actual policiesâ€”to carry out such measures.

Today in Greece, we are witnessing a truth that the anti-capitalist left knows well, or at least ought to know well: A government that is willing to retreat on economic questions and that turns to the right in terms of its class orientation is a government that will retreat on all fronts.

The policies of the Tsipras government regarding the refugees backpedal in the face of racism, even as the refugees continue to drown in the Aegean Sea. Those who manage to reach dry land in Greece are detained in miserable conditions that have only worsened after the decision of Balkan countries to shut their borders, thus closing the "Balkan corridor" to European Union nations.

In these circumstances, Tsipras invited NATO to launch naval operations to intercept refugees in Turkish waters and send them back to Turkey, where some 3 million people are already crowded.

The presence of the NATO armada in the Aegean complicates the refugee crisis since there is, as a result of the war in Syria, already a Russian naval force in the southeastern Mediterranean Sea. The armada also increases antagonism between Turkey and Greece over who will dominate in this area with so many islands, as well as raising tensions over gas and oil resources. Today, anti-racism is intimately related to antiwar and anti-imperialist struggles.

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The Tsipras government cannot effectively manage these combined problems. Thus, a deep political crisis has reopened, a crisis that could lead to a National Unity government. Or the situation could unravel further and force new elections.

Popular Unity (PU) is trying to respond to these conditions. PU was defeated in the September elections, narrowly missing the 3 percent threshold required to win seats in parliament with its 2.82 percent of the vote. However, it did succeed in bringing together many of the militants who left SYRIZA and grouped them together in local organizations throughout the country. These are militant forces that are experienced in organizing struggle. It is a reality that nobody can deny.

Internationalist Workers Left (DEA) organizes within Popular Unity. In preparation for the party's founding conference, most likely in May of this year, we are participating in a discussion and debate about achieving a truly radical anti-capitalist policy. We are also campaigning for a democratic constitution and functioning of the party, as well as enlarging its membership.

Currently, the Red Network, in alliance with DEA, is organizing discussions throughout the country. In these events, we defend the need to unite the entire radical anti-capitalist left around Popular Unity, from ANTARSYA (the Front of the Greek Anti-Capitalist Left) to those radical groups that quit SYRIZA, but have not yet joined PU.

We are discussing the need for a transitional program of radical reforms to confront the EU and the necessity of putting forward, linked closely to current struggles, a socialist perspective for the radical left. This perspective must

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get to the roots of the social needs felt by the majority of the population.

At the same time, we are aware that we do not have the luxury of time. Events in Greece are, most likely, once again moving in the direction of a great social and political crisis.

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Translated from Greek into French by Sotiris Siamandouras at the A l'encontre website, and translated into English by Todd Chretien