

The Greek Grassroots Challenge to the Politics of Austerity

August 16, 2012

Harrison and Landy recently returned from a trip to Greece, where they met with activists and others to gain a better understanding of the popular upsurge against the Greek government's austerity program.

The crisis in Greece began with the discovery that the Greek government had been concealing the size of its debt in order to stay within the monetary union guidelines: it was revealed to be 120 percent of GDP, one of the highest percentages in the world. This massive debt was the result of several factors: reckless borrowing, for example to finance the Olympics and to buy weaponry from Germany and the U.S. (Greece spends more on defense as a proportion of GDP than any other EU member) and flagrant tax evasion by the rich—but also the structure of the Eurozone itself, which was designed to create a market for German exports in Greece and the other weaker European economies by replacing weak local currencies with the Euro. This encouraged excessive borrowing. The “Troika” of the European Central Bank, the European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund agreed to a “rescue package”—three big chunks of bailout money—in return for Greece signing a “memorandum” promising massive privatization of public assets and harsh austerity measures—cutting government spending on wages, pensions, social welfare—to free up money for paying down the debt.

In part because of the worldwide recession, government revenues fell despite the spending cuts, and the debt continued to grow. Meanwhile, the austerity program provoked massive resistance from the Greek people. Huge protest marches on May Day 2010 were attacked by the riot police and followed by a general strike—the first of 16 since that date. Over the next two years, hundreds of thousands demonstrated repeatedly in the streets of Athens and other cities, Parliament was stormed several times, clashes with the riot police were a regular occurrence, and public squares across the country, including Syntagma Square in Athens, were occupied. As Parliament continued to do the Troika's bidding, passing one savage austerity package after another, popular support for the two political parties that have dominated Greek politics since the 70s—the conservative New Democracy and the nominally socialist PASOK—collapsed.

Elections in the spring of 2012 constituted a political earthquake. In the first round of voting in May, the Coalition of the Radical Left, SYRIZA, hitherto one of the country's several minor parties, came in second, with nearly 17 percent of the vote, just behind New Democracy. PASOK saw its share of the vote plummet from 44 percent in the last election in 2009 to 13 percent. At the same time, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn gained parliamentary seats—18—for the first time as a result of winning more than 425,000 votes, close to seven percent of the total. This is in comparison to three years before, when Golden Dawn had a tiny .46 percent of the vote. After attempts to form a new government failed, another election was scheduled for June 17. With opinion polls showing that SYRIZA might come in first, the Greek corporate media and European, especially German, officials went into high gear, warning the Greek people that a victory by SYRIZA would bring internal anarchy and result in Greece's expulsion from the Eurozone. To a certain extent this terror campaign worked. Despite the growing popularity of SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras, many voters apparently took fright and either abstained or voted for the parties of the memorandum. By the same token, however, many other voters rallied to SYRIZA for refusing to back down on its opposition to the memorandum. As a result, while SYRIZA again came in second, this time it won an astounding 27 percent of the vote.

Everyone seems to expect that the current coalition government of New Democracy, PASOK, and Democratic Left—a more conservative social-democratic split-off from SYRIZA—will be short-lived and that new elections might very well bring SYRIZA to power. The Troika has so far appeared determined to make an example of Greece by not allowing any renegotiation of the memorandum. Meanwhile, the country is enduring depression-like conditions, with official unemployment now at 23 percent but probably closer to 30 percent in reality, and youth unemployment exceeding 50 percent.

This was the background to our visit to Athens, July 5-12. We met with a number of SYRIZA activists, including party leaders, a woman involved in immigrant rights, and two young men from the Front of the Greek Anti-Capitalist Left, ANTARSYA. We also spoke to several people who were not political activists.

Athens certainly does not look like a city in the midst of great upheaval, let alone on the verge of revolution. We were in a working class district at one point and in another residential area that seemed pretty modest, as well as in the center. Especially for foreign visitors, signs of economic distress were hard to detect, although we were told that there is great suffering “behind closed doors.” We can’t recall seeing any begging. Wherever we were, we scarcely ever noticed political signs or posters or people leafleting. Of course, it was summertime, when things simmer down for a while. Perhaps too we were seeing signs of fatigue after two and a half years of militant protest. On the other hand, steel workers were on strike in an Athens suburb, and there were environmentalist protests against gold mining in Chalkidiki. And we heard and read about almost daily attacks on immigrants by members of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, Chrysi Avgi (more about which below.)

SYRIZA

Michalis Spourdalakis, a professor at the University of Athens, told us some of the history of SYRIZA. Until now, it has been a coalition of several parties rather than a single organization. The largest by far is Synaspismós, whose older leaders come out of the Eurocommunist current that split with the Communist Party, the KKE, in the 1980s. SYRIZA itself emerged from the Greek wing of the anti-globalization movement about eleven years ago. But it was the great popular upsurge against austerity that turned SYRIZA into a major force. Since the crisis began, the organization has been joined by some of the more leftwing members of PASOK, including a few members of parliament. Its mass support, however, is recent and comes from the streets. Time and again we heard that SYRIZA had earned the respect and loyalty of activists, especially of young people, by its intense involvement in and its “non-hegemonic” approach to the strikes, demonstrations and occupations. SYRIZA, we were told, showed its commitment to listening to and building the movement—rather than simply recruiting members, building their own organization, and heavy-handedly insisting on acceptance of SYRIZA’s agenda.

Spourdalakis stressed, as did most of the Greeks we spoke to, that SYRIZA is not a typical electoral machine but is instead rooted quite deliberately in mass actions—strikes, demonstrations, occupations—in the midst of which its MPs and officials can be found along with rank and filers. SYRIZA people we spoke to seemed acutely aware of the danger of substitutionism, that is, substituting the party for social movements. At the same time, Spourdalakis insisted, having a presence in parliament is essential because that is where so much media attention is focused and where, of course, major decisions are made.

Now that it has achieved a position of great trust and potential responsibility, SYRIZA has decided to transform itself into a unified organization, rather than a coalition of different organizations, and to recruit aggressively. While we were in Athens, SYRIZA announced that it was launching a big membership drive with the goal of growing from the current 15,000 to a party with

many times that number of members. The separate components of the SYRIZA coalition will be able to become tendencies within the party. Recruitment will take place at worksites, on campuses, in the streets and at the local assemblies that SYRIZA has been holding since before the elections. We attended one of these assemblies in an open area in the working-class suburb of Peristeri, attended by around 600 people, according to our estimate. Tsipras gave a rousing speech, and we were told there would have been a discussion period following the talk had it not been so hot outside.

Spourdalakis was cautiously optimistic about SYRIZA's future and said the party's ability to grow depended very much on staying deeply connected to extra-parliamentary struggles. For one thing, SYRIZA is now engaged in organizing unorganized workers—for example, bookstore employees, couriers, tutors, and other urban service workers—into new unions. Greece has two main labor federations, one for public employees and the other for private, both of them controlled by PASOK, and a third, smaller but still sizeable federation run by the KKE. Most Greek unions contain caucuses that are linked to SYRIZA and ANTARSYA. We were told by ANTARSYA that their group is especially significant in the teachers' union, as is SYRIZA.

SYRIZA declares that its first act, on winning power, will be to repudiate the memorandum. It will then demand re-negotiation of the debt to write off a major part of it. If that demand is rejected, a SYRIZA-led government will stop debt repayments. The party promises to impose heavy taxation on corporations and the wealthy, to nationalize the banks and re-nationalize those public services that have been privatized, to restore the minimum wage and labor contracts that have been undermined during the crisis, to drastically cut military spending, to emphasize renewable sources of energy, and to construct a strong social welfare state.

Panos Trigazis, head of Synaspismós's foreign policy section, was our genial host in Athens, introducing us to SYRIZA leaders and intellectuals and bringing us to a press conference, where we met Alexis Tsipras. Panos explained a great deal, including the meaning of SYRIZA's emblem: three superimposed banners, red for socialism, green for environmentalism, and purple for feminism and other social movements. As far we could see, the party's foreign policy is not too well defined at this point. Its printed statements in English are pretty much limited to relations with the EU and to regional disputes. SYRIZA takes the position that Cyprus should be re-united as bicomunal, bizonal federation without foreign armies and foreign bases. It wants better relations with Turkey and a mutual reduction in armaments, and it calls for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. SYRIZA's platform advocates the withdrawal of Greek troops from Afghanistan and the Balkans, and declares "No Greek soldiers beyond our own borders." It calls for the abolition of military cooperation with Israel, and support for the creation of a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders. The platform does call for Greek withdrawal from NATO, but a few people told us that this meant severing the military connection only. In any case, the platform also calls for closing down the U.S. base in Greece.

The KKE and ANTARSYA

As for the KKE, virtually every leftist we spoke to expressed disgust for its grotesque Stalinism (this is not just an epithet; the party actually glorifies Stalin) and fanatical sectarianism, which has seriously undermined the anti-austerity movement. The KKE has refused to join any kind of united front, and apparently its chief slogan during the elections was "Do Not Trust SYRIZA." In general, the KKE will not participate in any action it does not control—for example the huge annual Anti-Racism Festival, which we were lucky enough to attend. This three-day festival has been held in a park on the outskirts of Athens every summer for 16 years and is a moving expression of solidarity with the country's beleaguered immigrant communities. This July organizers estimated that more than 22,000 people, immigrants and non-immigrants, had attended.

The KKE is anti-EU, but so are other elements on the left, including a group within SYRIZA, the

Communist Organization of Greece, the KOE, which has Maoist roots. Also in favor of an immediate “Grexit” from the EU is ANTARSYA. One afternoon at a café near Syntagma Square, we talked with two of its young members. They were worried about popular demobilization now that the elections were over and were skeptical of SYRIZA’s ability or willingness to spearhead struggles against the new government’s plans to privatize much of Greece’s state assets. They warned that SYRIZA was not preparing people for a showdown with the Troika and the EU. ANTARSYA calls for unilateral cancellation of the Greek debt, except for money owed to pension funds; this in contrast to SYRIZA’s position of repudiating some of the debt but negotiating the rest. And it advocates immediate withdrawal from the EU rather than attempting to transform and democratize it, which is the stand taken by SYRIZA’s leading elements.

The ANTARSYA members said that SYRIZA is run by a small group around Tsipras, which is fairly autonomous, even in relation to Synaspismós members, and that a strong presence among SYRIZA’s leadership is also occupied by former PASOK MPs. The revolutionary groups within SYRIZA have almost no public profile, they said, and instead of pushing the party further to the left have restrained themselves in response to pressure from what they describe as the dominant social-democratic elements and a perceived need for unity. They claimed that after the June election, Tsipras had said that SYRIZA would not put people in the streets but would act as a “responsible” opposition.

It was difficult for us to assess the validity of ANTARSYA’s various critiques of SYRIZA and its strategy of immediate exit from the Euro, but in any event we asked the young ANTARSYA members if the group might not be more effective as a left wing within SYRIZA, rather than outside it. They said no, it was necessary to maintain their organizational independence to avoid cooptation, which they charged was or would be the inevitable fate of internal critics. We questioned this conclusion. It seemed to us that SYRIZA was a party in motion, attracting mass support and membership, and with, yes, the possibility of capitulating to the Greek and pan-European elites, but also with the potential of sparking a powerful chain of resistance to those elites. It should be noted that many ANTARSYA members voted for SYRIZA instead of the party’s own candidates in June, and that some of ANTARSYA’s leaders have gone over to SYRIZA.

Lessons for the U.S.

In fact we were struck by the contrast between SYRIZA, with its base in popular movements and its radical possibilities, and the Democratic Party in the U.S., which year after year corrals progressive movements into a party dominated by corporate interests incapable of fighting for progressive goals. In our country there has been plenty of direct action in the streets, in the public squares, on campuses, in workplaces. But unlike Greece, this has not been accompanied by direct action at the ballot box through a political party that is not beholden to big business and is clearly a party of the left. We think that the millions of Americans who are outraged by the ruthless pillaging of their society by arrogant elites desperately need an electoral movement like SYRIZA that is rooted in popular struggles and committed to winning and using political power to achieve progressive change.

Golden Dawn

While we were inspired, even exhilarated, by the strength of SYRIZA and its meteoric growth in influence and potential power, at the same time, we became increasingly aware of the ominous threat posed by the rise of Golden Dawn. Although it denies any association with neo-Nazism, Golden Dawn has adopted Third Reich paraphernalia and uses a symbol closely resembling the swastika. Its leaders have written and spoken of their admiration for Hitler and the Nazis. It is mobilizing anti-immigrant sentiment among many Greeks who blame immigrants for the economic

crisis. Currently, SYRIZA has 71 MPs, compared with Golden Dawn's 18, which reflects the fact that so far they have been more successful than the right wing in gathering support from people enraged by the country's economic horrors. But there is no guarantee that this relative success will last.

Golden Dawn regularly terrorizes immigrants, particularly those from Afghanistan and Pakistan, in the streets, in the public squares, on the metro, and in immigrant neighborhoods. They recruit bodybuilders from the gyms, and clothed in black, run through the streets in groups of 30 or 40, shouting anti-immigrant slogans, threatening and beating people with darker skins. Many of its members are criminals convicted of contract killings, trafficking, assaults, rapes, and armed robberies. At the same time, they position themselves as the defenders of public order, for example offering to accompany older people to ATM machines to protect them from robbers.

Golden Dawn has an alarming degree of support from the police, especially the riot police. It has been reported that as many as 50 percent of the police voted for its candidates in the June elections. Rather than protecting immigrants, the police regularly turn a blind eye to Golden Dawn's assaults. They often tell immigrants who complain of being attacked that they will have to defend themselves, or that they will have to pay a fee in order to file a formal complaint. In fact there are no such fees. [For a fuller account, see the Human Rights Watch report "Hate on the Streets: Xenophobic Violence in Greece," July 10, 2012.]

Golden Dawn's vicious xenophobia is accompanied by a crude male chauvinism that is shocking to see in the 21st century. We were told that the party believes that woman's place is in the home not in public positions of power. This was acted out on a television talk show ten days before the June elections, when Golden Dawn spokesman Ilias Kasidiaris threw water in the face of one female SYRIZA MP, Rena Dourou, and then hit another woman, Liana Kanelli, a Communist MP, three times in the face. Kasidiaris was elected to his seat in parliament in the elections that followed soon after this grotesque incident. The British *Guardian* reported "Several hours after the incident, with the group still resolutely refusing to apologise, two MPs with the socialist Pasok party were attacked by Golden Dawn supporters as they campaigned in northern Greece.... In recent months, and especially in the weeks that have elapsed between Greece's two [May and June 2012] ballots, the party has been linked to a number of attacks on migrants, liberals, human rights activists and journalists, particularly women. ["Golden Dawn MP's live TV assault shocks Greece," by Helena Smith, June 7 2012.]

Hilary Wainwright, founding editor of the lively left-wing British magazine *Red Pepper*, was in Greece at the same time we were. She has written an account of her trip in the current issue entitled "Greece: Syriza Shines a Light." Wainwright gives the following account of SYRIZA's response to Golden Dawn's virulent racist behavior:

On 23 June, for example, a gang of Golden Dawn thugs raided Pakistani grocers' shops in the working class suburb of Nikea, near the port of Piraeus, telling them they had one week to get ready and go, 'or else'. Syriza had won 38 per cent of the vote in Nikea . . . and after the attack the party helped to organise a rally and march of 3,000 in support of the shopkeepers. . . .

SYRIZA has long opposed racism in Greece. It has for many years participated in the Anti-Racism Festivals. Meanwhile, however, the brutal attacks on immigrants continue, and we asked people in SYRIZA how the party was responding to these assaults on a day-to-day basis. Specifically we asked if, in light of the failure of the police to defend the immigrants, was SYRIZA organizing any kind of physical response to the Golden Dawn attacks.

Leaders of SYRIZA told us that they believed that the effective response to Golden Dawn was political, to put forward a radical democratic agenda that could address the economic crisis in a progressive way rather than scapegoating immigrants. They also advocate human rights training for police and call on the police to do their job and protect victims of racist assault. They said that in their opinion to resist Golden Dawn physically would simply lead to disastrous fighting in the streets. SYRIZA wants to prevent the media from portraying a confrontation with Golden Dawn as a “clash of two extremes.”

We were concerned that the SYRIZA response, while good in many respects, is not adequate, and we found that several young SYRIZA members and supporters we spoke with also thought that more was needed. One young woman, for example, told us that when she had seen a Golden Dawn thug menacing an immigrant on the metro, she walked over and confronted him, demanding that he stop. Which he did. But, she said, if there had been five Golden Dawn thugs instead of just one, she doesn't think she would have been able to intervene in the same way. SYRIZA has to mount some kind of organized physical defense for the beleaguered immigrants, she thought.

Another young SYRIZA member told us that recently in response to the repeated physical assaults on immigrants a group of young anarchists had beaten up a number of Golden Dawn members. He said that while SYRIZA wasn't able to confront the Golden Dawn this way, he was very glad that this had happened. It was a blow against impunity.

When we asked SYRIZA leaders whether Golden Dawn could attack SYRIZA, they replied that Golden Dawn “wouldn't dare,” suggesting that SYRIZA was so much stronger and more numerous that such an attack would be foolhardy. But we were concerned that, in addition to the moral imperative to defend immigrant victims, a failure to respond to Golden Dawn more forcefully now could embolden them for broader aggression against the left down the road. Even now, as we noted above, women, journalists, human rights activists and leftists have been targeted on occasion.

There is a battle between the left and Golden Dawn as to who will be able to tap into and organize the rage of Greeks responding to their desperate conditions. We were told by a young SYRIZA member how this struggle emerged as early as the 2010 occupation of Syntagma Square. As we knew, the lower part of the Square was occupied by SYRIZA supporters and other leftists, but we learned that the upper Square was occupied by non-political people *and* right wingers who were waving huge Greek flags and saying that *all* politicians, including leftists, are corrupt and hopeless sell-outs.

Large sections of the Greek population are cynical about all politicians, and this cynicism is justified by the record not only of avowedly conservative and centrist parties but also purportedly left parties like PASOK and Democratic Left, which have shown themselves unwilling to challenge the Troika's austerity prescriptions. The June elections of 2012 were marked by a historically low participation rate, which reflected this popular distrust of all political parties.

The Challenge Ahead

This is the challenge now facing SYRIZA: Can it sustain resistance to the Troika and crucially, if elected, can it carry out a radical program that addresses the needs of the Greek people? Admittedly this won't be easy. There is a good chance that Greece will be forced out of the Eurozone if there is a SYRIZA government, though it seems that the country may be ejected even before that. Greece today revives many of the old questions about whether one can build “socialism in one country,” and we saw the disastrous consequences of the attempt to pursue that path in the Soviet Union. SYRIZA will need to implement the maximum possible anti-capitalist program at home, while at the same time engaging in the critical task of winning support for a radical, democratic socialist alternative

from the rest of Europe—from other countries with weak economies like Spain and Italy, to the countries of Northern Europe which, while more prosperous, also suffer from inequality, insecurity, and down the line, instability.

Solidarity

Dimitris Vitsas, the secretary of Synaspismós, discussed with us the need to build international solidarity, not just with SYRIZA but with the Greek resistance as a whole. He suggested strengthening an international campaign that has already started around the slogan, “We Are All Greeks.” Vitsas said that Greeks refuse to be the guinea pigs for extreme neoliberalism. Greece has been the weak link in the chain of austerity, but now SYRIZA’s success offers the possibility that Greeks can show the way to fight back. We at the Campaign for Peace and Democracy plan to organize a campaign along these lines in the U.S., building on the Occupy Wall Street solidarity initiative several months ago. Stay tuned for future developments.

Thomas Harrison and Joanne Landy are Co-Directors of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy in New York. They can be reached by email [here](#). This article originally appeared on the website of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy.