

The Struggle Against Syriza's Austerity Program

June 25, 2016

The month of May witnessed the second round of massive general strikes to hit Greece in 2016. Mobilizations on May Day were followed by four days of strikes in the lead-up to the Syriza government passing its austerity pension bill. The next day the so-called Euro-group of finance ministers met to discuss the government's further implementation of the Third Memorandum.¹

Despite the praise coming from the finance ministers and sections of European capital over the latest rounds of cuts being managed by Syriza,² even within those circles there are increasing doubts about the logic of austerity as a means to overcome the debt cycle. Reported debates³ within the Troika⁴ are leading to speculation that the International Monetary Fund will withdraw its funding of future bailouts.⁵ Despite this, and the deepening humanitarian crisis caused by the austerity policies,⁶ the Syriza government will be seeking even more cuts, coupled with regressive taxation, by the end of this month.



For the Syriza government, this represents over four billion euros in further cuts beyond those it has implemented since the end of 2015. Pensions, which had been fixed at 486 euros a month in August 2015, and which were already reduced over 19 percent by ministerial fiat, to 392 euros a month, to meet the requirements of the memorandum, will now be slashed by a further 12 percent, to 346 euros, or less than \$400 per month. Cuts to other forms of benefits to the elderly and disabled are also being sought, along with a newly agreed process for the sale of unpaid mortgage loans that raises the specter of the loss of homes.⁷ In addition, the government will seek major increases to the value-added tax (VAT), a form of regressive flat taxation, on basic services like water and electricity. Prime Minister Tsipras' government is also seeking to lower the tax exemption on low-income families, increasing the tax burden on the poor.⁸

Given the incredible level of tax avoidance by the wealthiest Greeks,⁹ such a move is simultaneously ironic and profoundly shameful. Perhaps most shameful is that the Troika sees this round of cuts as merely a warm-up to further annual cuts of 3.5 - 4 billion euros in 2017 and 2018, all leading to a fourth memorandum. There is hardly even a pretense remaining that the parade of past and future memorandums provides any real road out of indebtedness for the Greek state, let alone a path to economic growth.¹⁰

Syriza's Third Memorandum pension legislation has served to buttress a resurgent and revitalized right, which has watched Tsipras' Syriza steadily lose electoral support as the harsh reality of the pro-austerity turn becomes clear. New Democracy, the main electoral bastion of the right, has a 10-percent lead over Syriza in recent opinion polls, and the social democrats of PASOK¹¹ and liberals of POTAMI¹² are also seeking their rebirth on the back of the ever-diminishing Syriza. On the eve of the pension legislation the New Democracy leadership demanded that Tsipras resign and call snap elections, while the idea of a political bailout for the Syriza government, in the form of an expanded "National Unity" coalition, seems unlikely.¹³ And in the aftermath of the vote, New Democracy leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis accused Tsipras' administration of "totally impoverishing the middle class," while directly calling out Tsipras: "You're not a leftist. You're an opportunist who will do everything to stay in power."¹⁴ It would appear that Syriza now owns austerity, until the right returns to power.

There are a number of related truths about the class struggle in Greece since the beginning of the decade and the onset of an unprecedented economic cum humanitarian crisis. And it is worth drawing some of these out, as the response of the Anglophone left to the capitulation of the Syriza leadership to further austerity has often been facile and disappointing. On the one hand are sections of the left that argue that the objective conditions faced by the Syriza government have left them no choice but to accept a tactical defeat. The most prominent of those holding this position has been Canadian socialist Leo Panitch.¹⁵ As Paul D'Amato, the editor of the *International Socialist Review*, noted, "[Panitch's] argument accepts the limitations that Tsipras and the reformists inside Syriza put forth. They operated on the assumption that gaining office was the primary and sufficient condition for resisting austerity. Tsipras and Co. capitulated because they accepted a priori a condition that boxed them into a corner."¹⁶ On the other hand are those sections of the left who have always stood aside from the Syriza project as inherently reformist,¹⁷ and who with the Tsipras sell-out were able to proclaim its inevitability.¹⁸ D'Amato writes,

On one side is the argument that Tsipras must be defended for acting in the only way he possibly could. With a gun to his head, he had to give in and accept defeat, if only at some future date to be able to resist in some other way the dictates of Europe. The opposite argument is that Tsipras' capitulation is proof that it was a mistake for the left to enter, participate in, and build Syriza—it was bound, as a reformist party, to do what it did, and being in it has only lent these failed politics legitimacy they don't deserve. There are serious problems with both of these positions. The third position is the one laid-out by DEA¹⁹—in which it was necessary to work within Syriza, and through it to build the left on a stronger and more united footing, but also maintain and defend an independent line.²⁰

Ultimately, it is this third position, the strategic imperative to build both a principled left and simultaneously the coherence and capacity of the working class and popular movements in Greece, that offers any prospect of breaking through the dynamic of simply accepting the objective conditions as dictated by European capital or alternatively waiting for the mythic ideal organizational vehicle.



The Troika—capitalism, neo-liberalism, and austerity

In the two years between May Day 2010²¹ and the signing of the First Memorandum shortly thereafter, and the elections of spring 2012, the degree and character of social mobilization was unprecedented. This included more than twenty separate general strikes and demonstrations of hundreds of thousands in Greece fighting for basic economic demands. Over 2011, Greece was the beating heart of a fightback within Europe against the impact of a brutal recession driven by ineluctable neoliberal logic. With the momentary exhaustion of social struggle and the apparent inability of the social mobilization on its own to overcome austerity and the power of the Troika, there was a predictable turn toward seeking an electoral resolution. As Antonis Davanellos²² explained,

Those who were engaged in various struggles understood that in order to save themselves and save their class from the consequences of austerity, they needed to overthrow the government memoranda—the post-crisis EU-imposed austerity packages. They succeeded against George Papandreou (PASOK's leader, who resigned November 11, 2011); they were successful against Loukas Papademos (former governor of the Central Bank of Greece, former [European Central Bank] vice president, technocratic prime minister from November 2011, who called new elections in June 2012); and they found themselves opposed to Antonis Samaras (New Democracy, June 2012 to January 26, 2015) with the [Republican Security Companies] riot police, tear gas, and the requisitioning of striking workers (a military-type mobilization of employees, for example in the subway, to return to work). Successfully overthrowing Samaras using street tactics and direct action presupposed a semi-revolutionary situation, presupposed a working-class strength greater than there was at our disposal. When the popular majority arrived at this conclusion following certain "attempts," people turned toward a perspective of putting themselves on the road toward using elections as a means to combat austerity. It didn't signal a massive "shift to the right."²³

It is in this three-year period—between May 2012 and the initial electoral breakthrough by Syriza, its historic victory in January 2015, and then its capitulation in July and September 2015—that no country within the advanced capitalist world was more at the center of the left’s attention than Greece. Yet the predominant lesson that seems to have been drawn after the July to September 2015 period is that the Syriza experience was entirely wasted. And while the complete submission to the Troika by Tsipras’ Syriza represents a defeat, it does not come entirely out of the blue. In fact, it is consistent with a problematic and longer-term process that faces the entire revolutionary left. And as recent months show, the defeat in no way represents the final quiescence of the Greek working class, nor even the terminal end of a decade-long cycle of Greek working-class resistance to neoliberalism.

Despite representing a high-water mark in European class struggle since the 1970s, Greece in this decade has not represented a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation. Ultimately the failure to recognize this, and the relative strategic exhaustion of the movements by 2012 with the turn towards electoralism, has led to errors of the ultra-left variety. The fact that as of 2010 broad sections of the working class and social movements began to look to Syriza, and not to more programmatically pure anti-capitalist formations, for political leadership in the anti-austerity struggle thus was both a reality and an opportunity, one unfortunately lost on sections of the left.

However, the failure to recognize the more germinal process that had begun after decades of defeat and retreats by the international left, and to understand that the electoral opening was only made possible by the principled struggle of millions against austerity, led to even more devastating errors, culminating in Tsipras’ capitulation. The Syriza leadership had the opportunity to recognize the power of the mass support that they had begun to build in 2012. Despite the exhaustion at the time, it was possible to choose a strategy that was not in the first and last instance driven by electoralism, a strategy that would have required placing the critical choices in front of the Greek people well before July 2015.

There is no doubt that truly preparing the Greek population for being forced out of the Eurozone as a result of their principled opposition to the shackles of debt and austerity was a possibility for Syriza. This is not to say that such preparations would have been easy, though certainly it was more likely to lead to success than the strategy they chose, one premised on convincing European capital to give up on austerity. However, the fundamental prerequisite for the success of any such “Plan B” required a broad understanding on the part of the Greek people that future sacrifices, unlike those currently made to debt and austerity, offered the potential for a brighter future, in which they, and not the Troika, were the agents. Today, DEA (Internationalist Workers Left) and the Red Network²⁴ have raised the slogan: “Not a single sacrifice for the euro, no illusions in the drachma.” Given the very real failure of Syriza to ever prepare the ground for such a reality, the meaning of that propagandistic slogan will have to be prepared and fought for in the immediate future, something that Syriza once promised, but failed to undertake in practice.

The Syriza left’s participation in and commitment to that organization were predicated on recognizing that “the foundation of Syriza was facilitated in a decisive way by a tide of radicalization within Greece and internationally.”²⁵ It was precisely the experience of the period of mass radicalization and mobilization that motivated the Syriza left and its thinking. There was more than a decade’s worth of struggle within Syriza for creating a principled organization out of the anti-globalization, and then the anti-austerity, movements.²⁶ This process was created by consistent breaks to the left of sections of Synapsismos²⁷/Syriza, in a dialectical relationship with the movements in the streets and homes, squares and farms, schools and workplaces.²⁸

The process did not end with the first electoral breakthrough in 2012, nor certainly did it end in January or September 2015. As I noted in my talk for a February 2015 forum sponsored by the

Campaign for Peace and Democracy, AKNY (Greece Solidarity Movement New York), and other groups in the immediate and hopeful aftermath of the January 2015 elections,

There is a struggle starting in 2012 within Syriza about what's going to be the strategic perspective at a time in which what develops post-2012 is an exhaustion within the movements ... that created a struggle internal to Syriza. ... A turn by certain parts of the right wing of Syriza toward electoralism, a move to seek alliances with sections to the right, in this context, it became important to create a Left Platform within Syriza that could stand up and defend the historic roots of Syriza and its relationships to the social movements. And to defend some very basic principles about what the face of the anti-austerity fight was going to look like, and the idea that the electoral breakthrough was not the be-all and end-all, but was just one phase of a battle, which ultimately was going to depend on the capacity to mobilize the base out of which Syriza came.²⁹

The sections of the Syriza left, represented by the Red Network of Popular Unity (LAE, by its Greek acronym), were at the heart of that struggle. They made a decision not to take any positions in the Syriza government, including any ministerial positions, nor any of the approximately ten thousand other more prosaic sinecures. There was a recognition from mid-2012 onwards of a real struggle within Syriza for the meaning of the Syriza project. With the ever more serious battles within it, and the leadership's attempts to silence and discipline the left, to ban organized factions inside Syriza, and to centralize power in Tsipras, it would have been impossible to ignore the stakes in what was taking place.³⁰

The principled Syriza left largely regrouped as LAE for the September 2015 elections. As the Left Platform within Syriza, it had spearheaded opposition to Tsipras' leadership in defense of an anti-austerity politics and for a government of the left. The two main forces working within the Left Platform (and now LAE), were the Left Current, the former left wing of Synaspismos, and the Red Network, which consists of several smaller left groupings led by the revolutionary socialist Internationalist Workers Left (DEA). Two significant factions³¹ of ANTARSYA³² and a number of other far-left organizations and individuals beyond the Syriza membership also subsequently joined the LAE .

Despite having failed to cross the 3 percent threshold for parliamentary representation during the September elections, winning only 2.9 percent of the popular vote, LAE has continued to organize itself for the coming struggle. LAE's poor September election performance was not a surprise. Notably, the abstention rate for those elections was a record 45 percent, and LAE had formed less than a month before the elections, an outcome forced upon it by Tsipras' tactical maneuvering and one leading to strategic disorientation and relative disorganization. Nonetheless, LAE has been preparing both for its own founding congress in June 2016 and also for the coming general strikes and continued resistance to the Third Memorandum.

In the run-up to the LAE founding congress in June 2016, more than four hundred meetings have been held across all parts of Greece, which have drawn in more than five thousand participants to debate various proposals and to select delegates. This bodes well for the survival and breadth of LAE, as well as for building a strong organizational base. Different political tendencies have formed, with the Left Current having held their own congress this spring. The expectation is that LAE will have the character of a political front, but one that allows for one member, one vote, while giving rights to independent organizations and independent platforms. However, the exact form is under discussion and will be decided at the June congress.

These preparations have not prevented LAE from being active on a day-to-day basis. In the month

leading up to the May 2016 legislative proposals, LAE held more than one hundred meetings across Greece to explain the scope of Syriza's Third Memorandum austerity plans and to begin to organize for the May general strike. The level of participation across all of Greece has not been seen since pre-2012 and is another positive sign for the coming struggles.

The attempts to defend "the historic roots of Syriza and its relationships to the social movements" and "the face of the anti-austerity fight" arise out of an understanding of the urgent need for a united-front struggle against neoliberal capitalism, and against austerity, at a moment of historic weakness for the international left.³³ This means taking seriously, and offering critical support for, those remnants of the historic organizations of the working class when they show a commitment to fighting back and are engaged in real fights, while at the same time not giving up an independent voice.

This is what had driven the left within Syriza, and continues to motivate their work within both the LAE and the social movements and trade unions in which they are embedded. And the success or failure of these efforts is the only grounds by which to judge a strategy that does not look abstractly at political program. What is key is the relationship between the class, the social movements, and the organizations to which they belong and to which they look for political leadership. This then is part of a longer-term effort to strengthen the organizational capacity of the class and social movements and to build on the political and strategic clarity of these organizations in the face of the weaknesses and challenges of the left. For the Anglophone left, the need for principled, independent organization while fighting for unity in struggle, and the need for such struggle as an absolute precondition for any broader, sustainable organizational and electoral breakthrough, is a lesson that should be learned. This is particularly true in a moment of renewed electoral energy for left and progressive forces in some other European countries and the United States, existing in the absence of any movements comparable in relative strength to what exists in Greece.

Meanwhile, in Greece the principled starting point going forward for this renewed left continues to be the overthrow of the politics of austerity and its concomitant social struggles. The next rounds of confrontation with the Troika, and the Syriza government doing its bidding, have arrived. The historic mobilization for the Oxi ("no" vote) in early July 2015 presaged that the moment of mass mobilization had not passed, even if the full weight of this defiant act, and the subsequent vote, was ignored by the Tsipras leadership. And despite the disorientation caused by that leadership's capitulation to the Troika and the subsequent fragmentation and collapse of Syriza as a party defending ordinary Greeks, it did not take long for the fight against austerity, and with increasing clarity the fight *against* Tsipras' Syriza government, to return.

Thus, in early November 2015, less than two months after driving out the left and destroying any semblance of democratic accountability within Syriza, Tsipras and the government were met with the first general strike against pension cuts. In January 2016, lawyers launched an indefinite strike,³⁴ which continues to this day (along with journalists and workers in television and print media³⁵), and doctors, engineers, and mariners followed. This also marked the beginning of ongoing strikes and mobilizations by farmers and rural workers, which saw successful highway blockades³⁶ with high levels of participation.

And then on February 4, 2016, an enormously successful general strike was called by both public- and private-sector unions. The rate of participation in the strike itself for teachers and municipal workers was between 50 and 55 percent, which compares favorably to the 10 to 15 percent that took part in the January 2016 movement. In Athens, between 60,000 and 80,000 people joined in, recalling the heights of the anti-austerity fights of 2010-2012. Yet perhaps more impressive than the size of the participation in Athens was the breadth of support, from all across Greece, in small towns and villages, and the cross-sectoral support manifest when farmers escalated their blockade and

converged with municipal workers in Syntagma Square in Athens.³⁷

The government's capitulation on the anti-austerity and anti-debt struggles is not the only ground upon which Syriza faces a revolt. The government's handling of the more than 50,000 refugees being held on Greek soil has been a travesty and a complete abdication of the principles upon which Syriza had been founded. The Tsipras government, consistent with its general policy, has sought to curry favor with Brussels and has accepted its dictates without any real objection. They have invited Frontex³⁸ and NATO into Greece, while allowing the migrant camps to be controlled by the Greek army. This has made solidarity difficult, as the camps carry the character of concentration camps, with the migrants generally kept away from the Greek population; permission must be acquired from the army before entering.³⁹

Despite these obstacles, great efforts to organize solidarity have been made across Greece and across the left, both on the islands and in Athens. Movement activists have made consistent demands for basic human rights for the migrants, many of whom are facing violations of their Geneva Convention rights as war refugees. The movements have regularly called for basic solidarity—and demanded integrated housing and education, health services, and open borders—while attempting to connect the refugees with the Greek workers' and trade union movements. Nonetheless, thus far the government has continued to act at the bidding of Brussels and NATO.

The new round of general strikes and the broad social movements in defense of human rights for refugees and immigrants represent a renaissance of coordinated resistance to austerity⁴⁰ and a significant response to Syriza's continued commitment to austerity and the dictates of the Troika, the EU, and NATO. If recent—and not so recent—Greek history has taught us anything, it is not to underestimate the capacity of the Greek people to see such a fight through, whatever the temporary setbacks.

Footnotes

1. The memorandums refer to contracts between the government of Greece and the Troika (the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) that control the conditions of the Greek people's repayments to these lenders. The First Memorandum was signed in May of 2010, the Second Memorandum was signed in February 2012, and the Third Memorandum was signed by the Tsipras government in July 2015.
2. "Greek government turns focus to Eurogroup after securing vote on new measures," *Ekathimerini*, May 8, 2016.
3. Mark Mazower, "Berlin should be careful what it wishes for," *Live Rostrum*, May 12, 2016.
4. The "Troika" refers to the tripartite committee led by the European Commission, with the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, that organized loans to the governments of Greece and has controlled the conditions of their repayment.
5. "Gov't turns focus to next round of reforms as Berlin shifts on IMF," *Ekathimerini*, May 11, 2016.
6. Anand Gopal, "What Austerity Looks Like Inside Greece," *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2015.
7. "Greece concludes agreement with creditors on sale of NPLs," *Ekathimerini*, May 1, 2016.
8. Statistics cited in "Grèce. Le moment de vérité pour le mémorandum 3," *A l'encontre*, April 19, 2016.
9. Felicity Capon, "Greece to Target 80,000 Wealthy Tax Avoiders," *Newsweek*, March 23, 2015.
10. International Monetary Fund, "Greece: An update on IMF staff's preliminary public debt sustainability status," July 14, 2014. See also Rene Maltezou, "Exclusive: IMF says Greek debt 'highly unsustainable', debt relief 'essential' - draft memorandum," *Reuters*, April 12, 2016.
11. PASOK is the main social democratic political party in Greece. Its history of leading pro-austerity governments saw its support collapse to less than 5 percent in the January 2015 election,

which brought Syriza to power.

12. POTAMI is a liberal political party formed in 2014 by prominent journalist Stavros Theodorakis.

13. "Opposition parties turn up the pressure on ruling coalition," *Ekathimerini*, April 28, 2016.

14. "Greek government turns focus to Eurogroup after securing vote on new measures," *Ekathimerini*, May 8, 2016.

15. Leo Panitch and Richard Fidler, "Lessons from Greece: Leo Panitch and Richard Fidler debate SYRIZA," New Politics website, August 28, 2015.

16. Paul D'Amato, "Turning point in Greece," *International Socialist Review*, Fall 2015.

17. OKDE-Spartakos, "ANTARSYA and the anticapitalist project in Greece," *International Viewpoint*, April 8, 2014; see also Giorgos Charalambous, "What About the Greek Communist Party?" *Jacobin*, August 27, 2015.

18. See, for example, Marty Goodman, "Greek Syriza folds to EU demands," *Socialist Action*, July 22, 2015.

19. The Internationalist Workers Left, a revolutionary socialist group that had been within Syriza as a part of the Left Platform and is now active in Popular Unity/LAE.

20. Paul D'Amato, "Turning point in Greece," *International Socialist Review*, Fall 2015.

21. May 1, 2010, saw three people killed during one of the earliest protests against austerity, the first deaths during public demonstrations in Greece since 1991.

22. Antonis Davanellos is one of the leaders of DEA and the Red Network and former Central Committee and Political Committee member of Syriza.

23. Antonis Davanellos, "Reflections on our experience with Syriza," *International Socialist Review*, Spring 2016.

24. The Red Network is a network of groups and individuals within LAE/Popular Unity, in which DEA plays a leading role. Like the Left Current, it is likely to form an organized tendency/platform within LAE (see below).

25. See Davanellos, "Reflections on our experience with Syriza".

26. See Davanellos, "Reflections on our experience with Syriza".

27. Synaspismos, or the Coalition of the Left, of Movements and Ecology, was founded in 1991 out of the Euro-communist wing of the Greek Communist Party (KKE). It was the single largest component of Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left) and dissolved when Syriza was launched as a political party in 2013.

28. See Davanellos, "Reflections on our experience with Syriza".

29. Aaron Amaral, "Talk by Aaron Amaral," *Campaign for Peace and Democracy*, February 6, 2015.

30. See Davanellos, "Reflections on our experience with Syriza".

31. ARAN, or Left Recomposition, and ARAS, Left Anti-capitalist Group, both have political roots in the post-1968 European anti-revisionist left.

32. ANTARSYA, or the Front of the Greek Anti-capitalist Left, is a coalition of far-left political formations. The largest two formations that remain within ANTARSYA are the NAR (New Left Current), whose roots are in the Communist Youth movement, and the SEK (Greek Socialist Workers Party), aligned to the International Socialist Tendency.

33. Antonis Davanellos, "The Fourth Comintern Congress," *International Socialist Review*, Winter 2014-15.

34. "Lawyers extend strike to April 25," *Ekathimerini*, April 14, 2016.

35. "Print, electronic media in Greece hold 48-hour strike over pension reforms," *Ekathimerini*, April 21, 2016.

36. "The cost of the blockades," *Ekathimerini*, February 17, 2016.

37. Colleen Bolger, "Discontent returns to the streets in Greece," *Socialist Worker*, February 19, 2016.

38. Frontex (Frontières extérieures, or External Borders) is an agency of the European Union established in 2004 to manage cooperation between national border guards securing its external borders.

39. Nicole Colson, "A mass grave in the Mediterranean," *Socialist Worker*, April 28, 2016 .
40. "Farmers threaten to intensify blockades of borders, roads, airports," *Ekathimerini*, February 5, 2016; see also "Private sector workers' union plans 48-hour action," *Ekathimerini*, April 11, 2016; see also "Private sector umbrella union plans walkout on May 8," *Ekathimerini*, April 20, 2016.