Greece: Tsipras stabs his party in the back to act as the Eurozone? s enforcer of Austerity

International Secretariat, League for the Fifth International Thu, 03/09/2015 - 12:33

When Syriza? s Alexis Tsipras resigned as Prime Minister, on August 20, he did more than trigger the election that will be held on 20 September. Under the Greek constitution, he also empowered himself to name the entire list of Syriza? s candidates. This means that he can exclude the 32 Syriza MPs who voted ?No? and the 11 who abstained when he put the €86 billion bailout and Third Memorandum with the Eurogroup and the IMF to Parliament on August 14.

Moreover, his resignation also prevented the calling of a Party conference before the election, thereby ensuring no democratic decision by the membership.

In response, 25 Syriza MPs, led by Panagiotis Lafazanis, split to form a new party, Popular Unity, PU, that will contest the September 20 elections. Another major opponent of the new Memorandum, Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament, Zoe Konstantopoulou, has not yet joined PU but has indicated a willingness to stand on its list. Likewise, the KOE (Communist Organisation of Greece), which has three Syriza MPs, is still considering whether to join the new organisation.

Although the left wing of the former Tsipras majority faction, the Group of 53, are also debating leaving the party, it seems only a minority will affiliate to PU. Initially, therefore, the new party will be based primarily on the former Left Platform and the much smaller Red Network, formed by the far left group, the Internationalist Workers? Left (DEA).

Clearly, Tsipras? shameful betrayal of the 61 per cent OXI/No vote in the July 5 Referendum has severely undermined, if not disintegrated, the organised support basis of Syriza. There are reports of a mass exodus from branches and from the party? s youth organisation, to join the new party. However, Tsipras hopes that his personal popularity will sustain the party in the election and opinion polls, however unreliable, give some credence to this. One, conducted in August for the German tabloid Bild, gave Syriza 28 percent, New Democracy, 25 per cent and Popular Unity, 8 percent.

Greek opinion polls, not famous for their reliability, give lower figures but still place Syriza narrowly ahead of the right wing conservative New Democracy, in the lower 20 per cent range. They give Popular Unity only between 3 and 4.5 per cent. How objective these polls are is open to question but, in any case, it seems that PU will surmount the 3 per cent hurdle and get into parliament.

This would effectively put it back where Syriza was before 2012, that is, a long way from determining the fate of the country in governmental terms if elections are the central issue. Of course, when the new austerity programme and privatisations, and the repression needed to enforce them, begin to take effect from October onwards, all this may change. That is why Tsipras? actions are such an outrageous deception and betrayal of the hopes and trust that ordinary Greeks placed in his party. It is also why the main lesson
has to be learnt; the collapse was not caused simply by the duplicity and treachery of Tsipras and his faction, it was built into Syriza’s DNA from the very start. That DNA is called, in plain language, Reformism.

Syriza Mark II
Syriza promised to negotiate a major reduction in Greece’s government debt, which stood at €317bn in 2014, and which even the IMF admits is impossible to repay. It promised an end to the austerity Memoranda and, in Tsipras’ own words on January 25, to ?make the Troika history?. He promised to halt and reverse privatisations, notably that of Athens’ huge port of Piraeus, to re-employ sacked public service workers, end evictions and address the housing crisis and bring relief to pensioners and small farmers.

Instead, the European Central bank, which was supplying the Greek commercial financial system with Emergency Liquidity Assistance, effectively placed a tourniquet on supplies of the Euro to the Greek banks while the Greek oligarchs stepped up the flight of capital out of the country. Totally committed to negotiation, the government did nothing to check this. Meanwhile, as Yannis Varoufakis, the finance minister, has since testified, the Eurozone finance ministers went through the merest pretence of negotiations, demanding abject surrender from Syriza, rather than any relaxation of the previous Memoranda.

Their overriding purpose was to make an example of Greece to the other debt wracked states of the European Union and to demonstrate Germany’s domination of the Eurozone. Throughout this process, Tsipras and Varoufakis set up a smokescreen of optimistic reports aimed at deceiving the Greek people into passively awaiting their fate. The inevitable endgame began on June 30, when Greece failed to make its IMF repayment and government debt stood at €323bn.

At an all night session in Brussels, the top Eurozone leaders, headed by ?hard cop? Angela Merkel and ?soft cop? François Hollande, subjected Tsipras to what a senior EU official described as ?an exercise in extensive mental waterboarding?. They demanded that the Greek government accept an even more draconian package of austerity measures that included total surrender of fiscal sovereignty as the price of avoiding the collapse of the Greek banking system and ejection from the single currency. Tsipras was forced into accepting a toxic Third Bailout of €86bn (£62bn).

It is, of course, to the credit of the Left Platform that it opposed the Bailout, even if some of its MPs were hesitant in the early stages of the July crisis. However, given the brazenness of Tsipras betrayal, this can hardly be regarded as a particularly meritorious example of socialist intransigence. All they did was to stand by the promises that Syriza made at the time of the referendum only weeks before, which is what all the party’s MPs should have done.

In this respect, Popular Unity does not reflect any political progress. This is expressed in Lafazanis’ emphasis that Popular Unity still stands on the Thessaloniki Programme of September 2014, adding that he rejects the January 2015 election campaign’s pledge that Syriza would never leave the Euro. That was a retreat from the earlier promise that Syriza was for the Euro but not ?at any price?, meaning not at the price of Austerity. He correctly says that this should not have been made an equal pledge to ending austerity, let alone become the justification for accepting worse austerity than the previous two Memoranda.

Many on the left have argued that it was this ambivalence or contradiction that led to Syriza’s tragedy. This is not true or, rather, it is only superficially true. The underlying reason was that Syriza’s programme, not just its promises of specific reforms, which were fine in themselves, but its strategy and the agency for freeing Greece from austerity and the domination of the Troika, was reformist.
Its entire perspective remained trapped within the straitjacket of respecting capitalist property and obeying the rules of the capitalist state. It did not envisage anything beyond pleading the legitimacy of its electoral mandate and prolonging negotiations with the EU creditors and the Greek bankers representing the Greek capitalist oligarchs. Wolfgang Schäuble had the merit of frankness when he observed in January, "New elections change nothing about the agreements that the Greek government has entered into. Any new government must stick to the contractual agreements of its predecessors". In other words, the rights of contract clash with the rights of the electorate and, as Marx pithily observed, under capitalism, ?Between equal rights, force decides?.

There was in fact only one force that had the potential to check the force of the Eurozone ministers and the bond markets and that was the Greek and European working class. Syriza did not even attempt to mobilise them until the last minute and then only through the most passive form, a referendum, which it then immediately betrayed. In short, the Syriza government, from the first day, acted exactly like any bourgeois government (for that, in practice, was exactly what it was).

The Left Platform did not fundamentally challenge this. If its leaders had been serious about enforcing an end to austerity and Greece?s thraldom to the Troika, they would have fought to summon the working class to force Syriza to become a genuine workers' government, by mobilising the trade unions and the working class communities, by encouraging the creation of workers' councils and mass defence squads to defend themselves and the workers' movement from the repressive institutions of the capitalist state, whose attack would have been inevitable but not invincible. Instead, they tied themselves into collective responsibility as ministers.

Such a fighting perspective should have taken its cue from the election victory and built on the enormous enthusiasm that it generated to establish workers' control over all the key sectors of the economy, starting with the private banks. On that basis, the payment of interest on the debt should have been stopped, as should the flight of capital abroad. The enterprises and assets of the oligarchs in production and distribution should have been taken hostage for their owners? good behaviour and put under workers' control.

It could, and should, have been made clear from day one that the government would not under any circumstance impose austerity in order to meet the terms of the Euro authorities. Despite the fact that the party, like the majority of the population, had long maintained that it wished to stay within the Eurozone, rather than voluntarily take the risk of returning to the Drachma, it could have made it clear that ending austerity and cancelling the debt were its absolute priorities.

If Greece were forced out of the Eurozone as a result, the responsibility would rest on the shoulders of the Eurozone authorities and their masters, the billionaire bankers. An early and urgent appeal should have been made to the workers of Europe, to their parties and trade unions, to come to Greece's aid. In fact, only the relatively small forces of the reformist and far left mobilised demonstrations and protests.

The degree to which the Left Platform shares Tsipras' fundamental method is evidenced by its passivity throughout the near six months of his farcical negotiations. Instead of making the main thrust of their strategy working class action to force Tsipras and Co to fulfill their election promises, the Left Platform concentrated on lame propaganda for their Plan B; the equally unrealistic project of negotiations with Wolfgang Schäuble for a voluntary Grexit. This also explains their near paralysis in the first days after Tsipras' betrayals, some abstaining for fear of bringing down the government even though it was implementing the betrayal. Not once did they call on the workers to oppose it all by their own direct action in strikes and occupations.
Today, Lafazanis states that "The principles of the Popular Unity Party include the end of national subordination and the need to follow a new independent, sovereign and progressive course". He adds, ?If it is necessary in order to implement our programme, we will not hesitate to leave the euro zone in a coordinated way and re-establish a national currency. I don't believe these actions will be hell for Greece as the euro area propagandists claim".

Concretely, this means pursuing the mirage of a still capitalist Greece outside the euro. It implies that this will be achieved by negotiations with the very people who imposed the austerity. Leaving aside the problems of restoring the Drachma when the Greek banks are dependent on ECB funds to stay solvent, the belief that Wolfgang Schäuble and Co will take part in ?coordinating? Greece?s path to liquidity and sovereignty is just as utopian as Tsipras and Varoufakis? belief that they would negotiate a huge haircut for the European creditors and end austerity; all within the terms of the Euro as run by the ECB. Such a perspective shows that Syriza?s original reformist project of winning ?power? exclusively by elections is still intact in the strategy of Popular Unity.

The only difference is that Lafazanis and Kouvalakis believe that this can be done within the confines of an ?independent Greece? perhaps with the unselfish benevolence of Moscow or Beijing. All of this shows that the Syriza Left remains trapped in the paradigm of reformism. For them, what is really impossible and utopian is a break with capitalism itself. This is what drags them, whether cynically or naively, into a strategy of class collaboration and a search for progressive, nationally conscious capitalists rather than an orientation toward internationally class conscious workers both inside Greece and across Europe.

Popular Unity

Popular Unity theoreticians, like the economist Stathis Kouvalakis, claim that the goal of the new front is even ?broader? than the recomposition of the radical Left. It is to give expression to ?social forces that do not necessarily recognise themselves as part of the Left but want to fight austerity, the memoranda, and the 'troika rule reloaded' of the new memorandum?. He has said that ?we plan on making contact with all political forces and social organisations?, except the Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

Combined with the conscious choice of name; to echo the Chilean Unidad Popular of the 1970s, this can mean nothing other than an appetite to extend Popular Unity to the right of the Left Platform, that is, it is a search for a classical Stalinist Popular Front, which will inevitably mean renouncing anti-capitalist measures for a block with ?patriotic? sectors of the capitalist class. Of course, this will be no easy task, indeed, it is a search for the unicorn, but it provides the excuse for trimming PU?s programme down to Thessaloniki plus Plan B.

If Popular Unity is able to draw up a list of candidates for the September 20 elections with openly bourgeois figures on it, workers should not support it at all. However, if the search for a slate ?broader than the left? fails, that is, if, no thanks to Kouvalakis or Lafzanis, the PU slate is independent of all bourgeois parties or figures, then workers should vote for it. But such support should be highly and openly critical.

Within Popular Unity itself, its left components must now challenge the reformist, neo-Keynesian, programme of Lafazanis. Many of these smaller socialist groups and currents, like the CWI section, Xekinima, were part of the OXI campaign and are now part of PU. They must avoid the strategic mistakes that the Left Platform made in Syriza; they must challenge the programme of the leadership. There can only be a socialist alternative to austerity and the Memorandum as part of a socialist programmatic alternative for the Greek working class. Otherwise, the same reformist illusions that came from Syriza will now be spread by PU. It is the duty of all socialist or revolutionary organisations to stand for a socialist and anticapitalist perspective and programme inside and outside the PU.
In any case, even more important than the elections is a united front of all the left parties to block the Third Memorandum; to stop the privatisations, cuts and evictions by direct action up to and including an all-out general strike. For this, another attempt should be made to draw in the Communist Party (KKE) despite its usual sectarian blockhead stance that Lafazanis is no different from Tsipras.

The depth of the social and economic crisis facing Greece is such that it repeatedly forces the country into revolutionary situations, that is, ones in which revolutionary solutions that require power to be taken out of the hands of the capitalist class, are posed. These situations, however, have failed so far to become revolutions because of the non-revolutionary, even anti-revolutionary, character of the leaderships of the workers’ organisations. At crucial moments, these have either subordinated them to a strategy of relying on negotiations with the class enemy (Syriza and Popular Unity) or they have kept the most militant sectors of the working class in a state of sectarian paralysis (KKE).

Revolutionary party
The increasing contradiction between an objective situation that calls more and more for revolutionary solutions and the current political stance of the Greek left becomes ever more obvious. The left-reformist strategy of Syriza, as well as the ultra-left sectarianism of the KKE, are two sides of the same coin; an absence of political perspectives. With Popular Unity it is a repetition of the same old story, without any fundamental challenge to the essential weakness of the Syriza strategy. This points to the key issue: in a situation of acute political, social and economic crisis, the crucial problem facing the Greek working class is the absence of anything approaching a genuinely revolutionary party.

In this respect Antarsya, the Anti-capitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow, which held aloof from, and sharply criticised, Syriza, is equally part of the problem. It is certainly one of the most active and militant components of the protest movement against the Memorandum. It organises a large part of the most militant class fighters in Greece, as was proven again by the persecution it endured during the protests against Tsipras? capitulation. But, although it is based on certain abstract anti-capitalist principles, it has proved unable to develop the necessary programmatic and tactical coherence between its component organisations. For years, it has been unable to overcome differences on such important issues as the question of the Euro, the question of revolutionary strategy and the relationship to Syriza. Worse still, it hardly seems to see any problem with this. It is, therefore, no wonder that, in the current total reshaping of the Greek left, it has effectively split.

Even Antarsya?s Trotskyist components, OKDE-Spartakos (one of the sections of the Fourth International) and the SEK (section of the IST) adopted a passive propagandist policy that limited itself to polemical exposure of Syriza?s reformism, both during its electoral rise to office and during its months in power. They did not seek to mobilise the expectations and hopes placed in Syriza by huge numbers of workers and youth to raise the perspective of a workers' government, that is, to surround the reformist leaders with so much militant and organised support? that this could have forced them to go much further than they wanted or, if they refused, could have opened the way for a new leadership.

Such a strategy could have opened up the prospect of a genuine workers' government. This tactic, developed by the Leninist Comintern and adopted by Trotsky in the Transitional Programme, could have proved immensely valuable in winning revolutionaries the confidence of large parts of Syriza?s base and exposing Tsipras and Co a hundred times more effectively than mere paper denunciations.

Action Programme
What is now vital is to regroup revolutionary forces around an action programme starting from resistance to the Memorandum and the (likely) left-right coalition government that will try to impose it. This needs to
include the call for united front organisations of struggle that link all the trade unions at a local and workplace level with community and student organisations and the workers' parties. It needs to focus not only on the burning needs facing ordinary people but on solutions to them which do not respect the property rights of the oligarchs or the foreign investors, indeed, which exert workers' control over them and meet the needs at their expense.

Last, but not least, such a programme must set as its goal a government committed to taking anti-capitalist measures from day one. These would include throwing out the EU commissioners, nationalising all the private banks, imposing a state monopoly of foreign trade, nationalising under workers’ control the enterprises of the Greek oligarchs? and appealing to workers across Europe to take action to stop the EU leaders blockading Greece, throwing it out of the euro or conspiring to bring down the workers' government. Obviously, it would have to prepare an emergency currency, too.

? For Workers', not Popular, Unity in alliance with the small farmers and family businesses; end the futile and reactionary search for a bloc with the ?patriotic? bourgeoisie.
? For direct action up to and including an indefinite general strike to break the Memorandum and kick out the Memorandum government.
? For a Workers' Government taking anticapitalist measures
? For a united revolutionary socialist party on a transitional programme
? For Europe-wide solidarity with the Greek workers and youth to break the plundering and blockading of Greece by rulers of the European Union. Open the gates of Europe and all its states, without exception, to the refugees from the wars in the Middle East and Africa.
? For a Socialist United States of Europe.

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