

Greece: Tsipras success a major defeat for the working class

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The victory of Alexis Tsipras and Syriza in the Greek elections on September 20, despite their acceptance of the Third Memorandum that had been resoundingly rejected in the referendum on July 5, reveals both the severity and the character of the defeat inflicted on the Greek working class and social movements by that betrayal.

Far from collapsing because the mass movement against austerity took revenge by voting for the Left parties who continued to oppose the Memorandum, Syriza was able to maintain its electoral strength and hold all but four of its seats in the 300 seat Hellenic Parliament. This confirms that it was the mass movement that collapsed, militancy and enthusiasm replaced by demoralisation and disorientation.

It is true that the turnout, at 56.6 per cent, was down by 7 per cent compared to the January election that brought Syriza to power but, nevertheless, Syriza won 35.46 per cent of the vote, easily surpassing its main bourgeois rival, New Democracy. With six seats short of an absolute majority, it has again formed a coalition with ANEL, the right wing populist party.

The other side of this electoral coin is the results for the parties of the workers' movement who did stand against the Memorandum. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) held on to its 15 seats and its 5.5 percent of the vote represented a 0.1 percent swing towards it, although its actual vote declined from 336,188 in January to 301,632 in September.

ANTARSYA (Anticapitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow) a coalition including groups from a Stalinist or new left background, including those from the Fourth International and the Cliffite IST, maintained its tiny marginal vote of 0.85 per cent (46,096).

The clearest evidence of the change of mood, however, was the result for the newly formed Popular Unity, LAE. Although largely made up of the former Left Platform of Syriza, who opposed acceptance of the Memorandum, it received a pathetic 2.9 percent, just 155,242 votes across the whole country and 11,000 votes short of the 3 per cent threshold for gaining any parliamentary seats.

In other words, the left wing of Syriza, who had opposed Tsipras's sell out, failed to carry with them any significant numbers of Syriza's mass base and parties further to the Left stagnated. This is further evidence that, for the present, there is little popular support for their positions and their voting base cannot be seen as a strong launch pad for resistance to the Memorandum.

In the short term, Tsipras clearly won his game of calling early elections. Indeed, Syriza's losses are remarkably low. This does not reflect popular agreement with Tsipras' acceptance of the Memorandum but, rather, a determination to at least block the return of the New Democracy. This itself points to a

continued belief, or hope, that Syriza will provide a less corrupt government or implement austerity 'more fairly'. Likewise, numbers of people doubtless accepted Tsipras' claim that 'no more was possible' and, after years of political and social turmoil, there is also certain desire for 'stability'. That is to say, people blamed the EU, not Tsipras. All of this shows that Syriza's roots in the masses are stronger than many forces to the left of Syriza have always claimed.

The left critics of Syriza can take no comfort from the results. Their criticism may have been vitriolic but it was essentially passive and went alongside a sectarian self-isolation from Syriza's mass support in the working class. This was at its most extreme with respect to the KKE, which even tried to get its supporters to spoil their votes in the July Referendum. Despite all the mobilisations and turmoil since Syriza first emerged as a significant political force, and despite its appalling betrayal, such tactics have had virtually no impact on Syriza's supporters and the outcome for the KKE is, essentially, stagnation.

Antarsya (and smaller centrist groups, too) were not so extreme but still largely confined themselves to denunciation and advanced the united front only at the economic level. They built their hopes on the schema that the masses would turn towards them as an almost automatic result of Syriza's betrayals and their own denunciation.

The electoral victory of Tsipras thus points to the utter failure of the leaders, parties, and blocs to the left of Syriza. It testifies to a gigantic crisis of leadership facing the Greek working class. Whether or not LAE's defeat leads to its disintegration altogether, its politics are a continuation of its failure as the Left Platform within Syriza, where its members never showed any appetite for fighting the media celebrities like Tsipras or Varoufakis. At best, they sought a few concessions, rather like the Greek government with the EU/IMF. In a word, it was a Loyal Opposition to the agents of the bourgeoisie running Syriza. It did not warn the working class, or really obstruct its masters, until it was too late.

On the other hand, the KKE and Antarsya failed to engage with Syriza's supporters or to mobilise the mass of the working class via a systematic application of the united front. They either refused it altogether or limited it to economic issues. Above all, they failed to raise it to the level of government at a time when the question of a workers' government was actually posed. Syriza in power should have been pushed both from within the party and from outside to break with the Greek and EU bourgeoisies and to encourage and assist the working class to take over the banks and workplaces and to arm itself in its own defence. Even if only as agitation, such proposals would have alerted the working class to the life or death struggle that was approaching and prepared them to break from Tsipras.

Instead, LAE and Antarsya and other muddleheads made a fetish of leaving the Euro and EU. This undoubtedly pushed them still further away from the mass of Syriza workers who rightly saw this not just as an utterly impracticable alternative but also as a dangerous adventure. In effect, the focus on 'Grexit' was used to justify failure to raise demands and tactics that would have strengthened the Greek workers' class struggle, within the national and international balance of forces.

Change

The election result reflects a fundamental change in the political-economic situation in Greece. The defeat of the left (KKE, LAE, Antarsya combined) expresses the defeat of the entire working class movement and all oppressed layers of society. After the elections in January, the creation of a popular front government, the agreements with the EU, the betrayal of the Oxi and the defeat of this movement, the re-election of Syriza-ANEL, opens a new period.

The previous, pre-revolutionary, period had its origins in the youth uprisings and mass movements after 2008 and saw a series of 30 general strikes as well as square and workplace occupations. The mass

movement forced the resignations of bourgeois governments and the destruction of the established two party system but more than this such spontaneous mass actions could not do. Although the election of Syriza in January represented a recognition that Greece's crisis required a political and governmental answer, Syriza itself did not represent any qualitative change in the character of the government.

The key issue in that period was the fight for a workers' government based on the workers' own fighting organisations. Such a fight, however, required a conscious strategy that, for example, would not have limited general strikes to one or two day protests but developed them into determined attempts to bring down the austerity governments.

Now, the ruling class has put the workers, the youth, and the popular masses onto the defensive. In the coming round of attacks, the working class will be fighting from a weakened, defensive and fragmented position. The unions that support the government will do all in their power to hold back and limit the resistance to sectional and local levels, The KKE will, as usual, block a united front with workers still loyal to Syriza by refusing to issues calls for united action with them.

Although this government is based on the same parties as the last, and many former ministers have been reappointed, there is a big difference between the two that reflects this change of period. Syriza has purged its left wing and that means that this electoral victory, unlike that in January, will be used as a 'democratic' mandate by the new government to justify enforcing the Memorandum, not obstructing it. Those who voted for Tsipras as a 'lesser evil', or as the source of some 'stability?', will have a rude awakening.

Moreover, while Tsipras and the Syriza leadership were always prepared to govern within the framework of Greek and European capitalism, the crisis of the past years, and the inner conflicts in Syriza, meant that the Greek bourgeoisie and European imperialism did not trust them. That has now changed; by purging their own party, Tsipras and the Syriza leaders have proved themselves to be reliable tools.

The principal victors of the Greek elections are thus the EU, the IMF and, in particular, the German government. The EU will now use the Syriza government as a tool to impose its politics. The working class will face severe attacks, but in a very weakened position at all levels. This is a very advantageous situation for the ruling class and for the imperialists. In this context, it is also important to realise that the elections also signify a victory for the Greek capitalist class.

The left now needs to draw a balance sheet of past failures and to prepare for the next round of attacks in adverse conditions. In such circumstances, the fight for a united front of workers' organisations becomes absolutely critical. The election result shows beyond doubt that calls for united action must still be directed at Syriza, not in the expectation of any positive response from its leaders, but in recognition of its continued working class support and the contradictions within the party, particularly where its members are responsible for the implementation of cuts.

In this context, revolutionaries need to elaborate a revolutionary action programme for the current situation, around which a new and expanded revolutionary organisation should be built. This would also be the means by which to intervene in the debates of the different sections of the left in Greece.

Whilst the working class is now in a defensive situation, it should not be forgotten that it has been through a whole pre-revolutionary period and been engaged in heightened forms of class struggle. This experience has changed the class as well. A revolutionary action programme has to relate to this development and draw the lessons of the past period in order to make the working class and, in the first place, its vanguard, conscious of this rich experience. Only if one succeeds in that, and links these lessons to the tasks of the

coming period, can one succeed in overcoming the defeat and laying the foundations for the future.

Without the left drawing the necessary conclusions from the failure of both the Syriza leadership and its supposed opponents amongst the reformists and centrists of the Left Platform, the danger of an even more decisive defeat is clear. While there may be spontaneous forms of mass resistance or even violent eruptions, these could become signs of desperation if they are not combined via a political strategy and leadership. This could lead to the regrowth growth of anarchism and autonomism on the one hand and increased passivity, or even a massive turn to the right, on the other.

Although the far right did not make significant gains in the elections, in a situation of further social decline, imposed by a supposedly 'left' government, there is a clear danger that this could change. Golden Dawn is now the third biggest party and could make further advances by playing the nationalist, chauvinist and racist cards.

The events from June 25 to September 20 are a wake up call to working class Europe. Syriza's rise and transformation in power is not, as the European Left parties claim, a sign of the 'maturity' of the Greek people or a vindication of their own reformism. The leaders of the German Left Party praised Syriza in the election campaign and now present its politics as a model for the European working class. This would be the worst, most dangerous, conclusion to draw on the international level. It also testifies to the failure of the European Left to organise solidarity against their own rulers in Germany and beyond. The other side of this coin is an increased tendency to national centredness in terms of programme and support for leaving the EU/Eurozone rather than solidarity and joint actions across borders and the struggle for a United Socialist States of Europe.

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