Editorial

Why Greece's June Elections Matter to All of Us

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The final opinion polls before the June 17 parliamentary elections in Greece report that SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) has the support of between 25 and 31.5% of voters, up from the 16.7% it won in the May 2012 elections, when it stunned many people by leaping to second place among Greece's many political contenders [1]. It's possible that SYRIZA could come first this time.

SYRIZA is an alliance of left groups. By far the largest of these is the Coalition of Left Movements and Ecology (Synaspismos or SYN). The majority of SYN supports a politics of anti-neoliberal reforms within the eurozone but there is a strong Left Current within SYN that favours leaving the eurozone. There are also other groups in SYRIZA that are more radical or revolutionary socialist.

SYRIZA's platform [2] includes commitments to suspend Greece's debt payments, tax the super-rich and companies, cut military spending, nationalize the banks, strengthen workers' rights, close foreign military bases and quit NATO. After coming second in May's elections, Alex Tsipras, the president of SYN and head of SYRIZA, presented a five-point basis for forming a coalition government [3]. This included the "immediate cancellation of all impending measures that will impoverish Greeks further" and of "all impending measures that undermine fundamental workers' rights."

It's no surprise that pro-austerity politicians and other spokespeople of the Greek and international ruling classes are horrified at the prospect of a SYRIZA win, predicting dire consequences [4].

SYRIZA's platform repudiates the vicious agenda that ruling classes in Europe and beyond have been prosecuting for the last several years. A SYRIZA win could fuel the militancy of the Greek working class, who have been striking in large numbers (17 general strikes in two years!), organizing popular assemblies in city and town squares and in some cases occupying workplaces to resist austerity (see the 25 minute video here).

If SYRIZA comes first, it may still have too few seats to form even a coalition government. The right-wing party New Democracy and other parties will be under tremendous pressure to form a coalition government for the sake of "stability" and the continued implementation of the policies of attacks on wages, social programs, jobs and rights that have already caused so much suffering in Greece. Greek capitalists as well as the governments of the largest powers in Europe, multinational corporations and international financial institutions will use any means at their disposal to enforce their interests.

The stakes are high in Greece because it is a testing ground for the neoliberal austerity measures that have been the dominant capitalist response to the global economic crisis. A rejection of that agenda in Greece would be a stinging political defeat for its backers. It would deny them their claim that "there is no alternative" to austerity. From their perspective, repudiation of austerity in Greece would be a dangerous encouragement to working people in other European countries and on other

continents to follow the Greek example.

Advance or retreat?

How worried should capitalist classes and neoliberal governments be if SYRIZA forms a government? How hopeful should people who reject austerity and support social justice be if that happens?

It's entirely possible that a SYRIZA-led government would retreat from its anti-austerity commitments because of the huge economic and political pressures it would face from its enemies at home and abroad (including top Greek civilian, military and intelligence service officials). It could call for its supporters to remain calm, lower their expectations and trust the government to act in their best interests in an extremely difficult situation. This could lead to a catastrophe, with many people who were willing to back SYRIZA to put an end to austerity becoming demoralized and some turning to the military or the fascist right for salvation.

Whether a SYRIZA-led government presses ahead or retreats would depend in large part on how strongly workers mobilize to demand an end to the attacks they have been facing from Greek and other European capitalists and governments. The level of solidarity mobilization by people outside Greece, particularly in key European countries, would also be a factor.

Retreat by a SYRIZA-led government is not inevitable. The Greek working class is the most combative in Europe, with sizeable radical left forces within it (in addition to SYRIZA there is a large but sectarian and rigid Communist Party, the far-left ANTARSYA alliance and anarchists). If the working class mobilizes to press a left government to break with austerity policies and the government moves forward, we could see something that's extremely rare: a government in office in a capitalist state that actually fights for the key immediate demands of the working class (what we can call a class-struggle government [5]).

If this happens, Greece would be in for explosive — even revolutionary — struggles. A confrontation between capitalist power and a SYRIZA-led government pushed by mobilized wage-earners and unemployed people could lead to the government taking measures that are more radical than what most SYRIZA leaders intend. Right-wing resistance to such moves could spark even more widespread and radical action from below by working people. Such struggles would cause political ripples far beyond the borders of Greece.

As socialist writer Stathis Kouvelakis argues [6], "This is what scares most the dominant forces in Greece and in Europe and explains their hysterical campaign against SYRIZA and the perspective opened up by its possible coming to power."

The worries about a SYRIZA win remind us that the austerity agenda is not invulnerable. The situation in Greece today demonstrates something that is rarely clear in North America, where all the major parties accept neoliberalism and the level of protest and resistance is low at the moment (except in Quebec, where the determined student mobilization has sparked a broader mass movement that's having a big impact): parliamentary elections can be incredibly important in the battle against austerity. The austerity agenda can't be defeated through the ballot box, but at times elections can play a role in generating the kind of popular upheaval that can beat it back.

If a class-struggle government comes into existence in Greece, everyone around the world who wants change that's geared to meeting people's needs and creating ecological justice should do whatever we can to defend it against the incredible hostility it will face from the forces of capital.

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P.S.

* Tuesday, 05 June 2012 23:49: http://newsocialist.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=636:editorial-why-greeces-june-elections-matter-to-all-of-us&catid=51:analysis&Itemid=98

Footnotes

[1] http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_14241_01/06/2012_444874

[2] http://www.progressive.org/platform_of_greek_left.html

[3] http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/05/09/the-seismic-results-in-greece/

[4] http://www.marxist.com/greece-syriza-poll.htm

[5] See on ESSF (article 24022), Workers' government: the realities of our era are different than in the 1920s.

[6] See on ESSF (article 25392), Two points of view on the Greek Left, Syriza and the responsibilities of the European Left.