

COMMENT

# Greece: The making of Syriza

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Greece’s Coalition of the Radical Left, known as SYRIZA, has a chance of winning parliamentary elections in Greece on June 17, which would give it an opportunity to form a government of the left that would reject the drastic austerity measures imposed on Greece as a condition of the European Union’s bailout of the country’s financial elite [1].

SYRIZA rose from small-party status to a second-place finish in elections on May 6 [2], finishing ahead of the center-left PASOK party, which has ruled Greece for most of the past four decades, and close behind the main conservative party New Democracy. When none of the three top finishers were able to form a government with a majority in parliament, a date for a new election was set—and SYRIZA has been neck-and-neck with New Democracy ever since.

Where did SYRIZA, an alliance of numerous left-wing organizations and unaffiliated individuals, come from? Panos Petrou, a leading member of Internationalist Workers Left (DEA, by its initials in Greek), a revolutionary socialist organization that cofounded SYRIZA in 2004, explains how the coalition rose to the prominence it has today.

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THE COALITION of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) is a political project of left-wing parties and organizations in Greece, with both reformist and revolutionary forces inside it. There are two important features about its character that have played a very important role in its evolution during these years, and in its success today.

The first is that all of the organized forces involved in SYRIZA maintain their independence and their right to publicly argue for their politics and ideas. So the debate between its various forces—heated when necessary—has always been open. This has kept SYRIZA an evolving project, not dominated by any one force, through to this day.

The second feature that has also played a role in maintaining this open character is that SYRIZA’s project has attracted activists who are not affiliated to any of its organized components.

## **Background to the foundation of SYRIZA**

SYRIZA was founded in 2004. At the beginning of the 2000s, the reformist party Synaspismos—the Coalition of Left Movements and Ecology, referred to as SYN, and the largest organization within SYRIZA—was in electoral decline, facing the threat of not being able to win enough votes to pass the threshold for being represented in parliament. This was the result of its center-left policies during the previous years, which made the party look like a satellite of PASOK.

A left-wing turn was needed, and it was expressed mostly through the involvement of SYN in the anti-globalization movement and the antiwar movement of 2003 against the invasion of Iraq.

Regular joint actions between SYN and organizations of the radical and anti-capitalist left—DEA among them—took place in the anti-globalization and antiwar movements, and in the creation and activities of the Greek Social Forum. This kind of coordination represented an important break with the sectarian past of the traditionally fragmented Greek left.

The pressures from the movement itself—for unity of action and to express in the political field the dynamic of the Social Forum and the anti-globalization and antiwar movements—gave birth to SYRIZA.

Even then, for the leadership of SYN, SYRIZA was mostly an electoral alliance to help it surpass the threshold of 3 percent of the nationwide vote to enter parliament in the elections of 2004.

But many activists involved had a totally different vision of this unitary project. Involvement in the social movements and engagement with other forces of the radical left had a profound effect on the membership of SYN and its social base. This change would be manifested in the next few years, when SYRIZA's existence was put in jeopardy by the leadership of SYN.

So SYRIZA's formation had to do with the emergence of the anti-globalization and antiwar movements, the sentiment of many unorganized activists for unity on the left, pressures on a moderate reformist leadership in SYN, and the willingness of some revolutionaries to engage in united-front tactics.

## **The first major crisis and the reestablishment of SYRIZA**

Right after the elections, in which SYRIZA won 3.26 percent of the vote and took seats in parliament, the first major crisis broke out.

The leadership of SYN, ignoring the pressure from its left that had produced SYRIZA, tried to get rid of the alliance and return to center-left politics as usual. Just a few months after the parliamentary election, SYN participated in elections for European parliament on its own platform.

But in the end, instead of the leadership of SYN getting rid of SYRIZA, members of SYN got rid of their leadership. At a congress of SYN in December 2004, the left wing of the party won a substantial majority, based on a political platform that stood for the continuation and extension of the party's left turn, including a continuation of SYRIZA. A new leadership was elected in SYN, with Alekos Alavanos becoming the new chair.

Of course, SYN's proclamation of a left turn and the re-launching of SYRIZA had to be tested in real life. Once more, it was the resistance movement that set the framework for SYRIZA.

From spring 2006 until summer 2007, a massive student movement erupted, challenging the right-wing government led by New Democracy. Universities were occupied for months, thousands of students attended the general assemblies on their campuses, and tens of thousands of students marched in every city of Greece each week. This movement won an important victory—the right wing had to drop its plan to cancel Article 16 of the constitution, which guarantees the public character of the education system, including at the university level.

It was during these months of struggle that SYRIZA re-emerged. In the student assemblies and in the university teachers' union, activists from the radical left worked together to lead the struggle. Outside the campuses, joint action by different left forces played a major role in establishing committees in support of the student struggle. Apart from these efforts on the ground, it was very important that inside the parliament, Alekos Alavanos acted as a spokesperson for the student movement's grievances, demonstrating how radicals can operate in a parliamentary setting.

This was the basis on which SYRIZA was re-launched, with a more radical platform than in 2004. In autumn 2007, SYRIZA contested national elections, and its radical left stance won more than 5 percent of the vote—which at that point represented a major success for the coalition [3].

Other organizations of the revolutionary left joined SYRIZA, some before and some after the election. Unorganized people were attracted as well. Both new activists engaged in radical politics for the first time in their lives and veterans of the left-wing movement who were inactive in previous years saw SYRIZA as something new and hopeful.

After the elections of 2007, the left-wing character of SYRIZA was confirmed in many ways, both through the involvement of its forces in the resistance movement, and with the presence of its representatives in parliament. In particular, Alavanos' harsh attacks on then-Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis represented a break with the traditional parliamentary politeness.

With a right-wing party in office, it was not PASOK, historically the main opposition party against New Democracy, but SYRIZA that was considered the most serious rival to the government. For months, the coalition polled around 15 to 18 percent of the vote in surveys about upcoming elections.

This was the first "spring" of the Greek radical left. As we shall see, it didn't last long, but it was proof that the current turn of the electorate towards SYRIZA isn't an accident—and that the working class has been aware of SYRIZA for some years.

## **The youth rebellion of 2008**

The next high point in Greece's struggle was the youth revolt of December 2008 after a 15-year-old student was killed by two police officers in Athens [4].

SYRIZA was the only force in parliament that supported the youth revolt. With Athens burning every night from rioting and police stations besieged by angry youth, the left was under enormous pressure to "denounce the violence" and support a "return to stability." The Communist Party backed off and attacked the rebellious youth as "black-hooded provocateurs." SYRIZA withstood that pressure—its message to young people was not to go back, but to keep demonstrating.

According to many commentators, SYRIZA paid a price for its support of the youth among the broader population—SYRIZA's strong position in the polls began to decline. Even some leading members of SYN concluded that the coalition had gone too far in supporting the protests. But for

DEA, December 2008 is one of the moments when we were proudest of SYRIZA.

Since that point, SYRIZA has been targeted by the media and mainstream parties as a collection of irresponsible “troublemakers.” But importantly, that is exactly what is being said of the coalition today, more than four years later, but in a different context.

In January 2009, when the pressure against it was mounting, SYRIZA printed a poster with the slogan “Not a single step back!” Today, the class polarization is so intense that people attending public mass assemblies of SYRIZA use this slogan themselves. Today, SYRIZA is under enormous pressure to behave “responsibly”—but its rank and file is saying, “Not a single step behind!”

Working people who vote for SYRIZA today know from the attitude it took back in 2008 that SYRIZA won’t back down under pressure.

### **A struggle between two different tactics**

The attacks from the political and media establishment after the youth revolt and the arrival of the world economic crisis in Greece put pressure on the forces in SYRIZA, especially Synaspismos, to adapt more “moderate” politics.

At the same time, with the right-wing New Democracy government collapsing in popularity, the vast majority of workers turned to PASOK as the most “realistic” way to protect themselves from the coming economic storm. During both European parliamentary elections in summer 2009 and national elections in autumn of the same year, SYRIZA polled around 4 percent.

The next major crisis of SYRIZA broke out in this period. After the euro-elections, the right wing of SYN rebelled at a party conference, denouncing SYRIZA as an “extremist far-left alliance.” The departure of conservative forces from SYN over the course of this period represented an opportunity for SYRIZA to make a further left turn, but this didn’t happen immediately.

At the same conference of SYN, Alavanos left the party leadership to Alexis Tsipras in order to focus mainly on building SYRIZA. But following the national elections that put the government in the hands of PASOK, the new leadership of SYN chose a platform of “programmatic opposition” to PASOK—meaning a degree of tolerance toward the center-left party, in which SYRIZA representatives would vote for positive proposals from PASOK, vote against negative ones, and generally pressure PASOK toward more traditionally social democratic positions.

In counterpoint to this, a left pole emerged inside SYRIZA, with DEA playing a leading role, which stood for radical opposition to PASOK. At a SYRIZA national conference, Alavanos confronted his own party, aligning himself with the left-wing position, and urging a working-class revolt against escalating attacks and a break, or rupture, with the European Union (EU). DEA and other far-left organizations united with Alavanos to form the Front for Solidarity and Rupture to counter the turn of the SYN leadership.

In May 2010, the Greek government, led by PASOK’s George Papandreou, signed the first “Memorandum” with the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund—known as the “troika”—that imposed drastic austerity measures.

Papandreou’s cooperation with austerity made the tactic of “programmatic opposition” irrelevant. When the first waves of working class resistance to the Memorandum appeared [5], including general strikes in May and June 2010, the SYN leadership moved toward the positions that had been

previously denounced as “far-left extremism.”

But at the same time, the SYN leadership believed that the best strategy for the period was to ally itself with disaffected social democrats. This project threatened to transform SYRIZA from a political force of the radical left into a broader and more moderate pole of attraction for disillusioned PASOK voters. There’s nothing wrong in trying to win over PASOK’s base, but SYN was following this strategy based on a strictly electoral calculation.

So in the regional elections in autumn 2010 [6], Synaspismos chose to support the campaign of a former leading figure from PASOK in Attica, and SYRIZA was split in various races, with the Front, led by Alavanos, contesting on its own. In the end, both parties paid the price for the fragmentation. The former PASOK member supported by SYN won just 6.22 percent of the vote, far below the high expectations for him. In his campaign, Alavanos polled 2.16 percent.

Alavanos standing separately as a candidate of the Front was a critical step—a matter of life and death for maintaining SYRIZA as a radical left project. But in the end, rank-and-file supporters of SYRIZA clearly disapproved of the fragmentation and punished both wings. One result was that ANTARSYA, the smaller electoral coalition of far-left and anti-capitalist groups in Greece, won its best showing in an election to this day, polling at 2.28 percent.

### **The revival of SYRIZA and the left-wing turn**

After this crisis, SYRIZA was able to regroup again. The opposition among rank-and-file SYRIZA supporters to fragmentation was one important factor. Even within Synaspismos, a significant number of members and cadres, while they strongly disapproved of the formation of the Front by Alavanos and his allies, put blame for the crisis on their own party leaders and the idea of an alliance with social democrats.

In addition to this sentiment, the failures of the center-left PASOK government, a growing left-wing opposition to it, the worsening of the crisis and the austerity measures, and the radicalization of the resistance movement pushed the SYN leadership further left.

As the debates continued and the first steps were taken to re-launch SYRIZA, the so-called “movement of the squares” broke out—massive occupations of public plazas, like Syntagma Square in front of the parliament building in Athens, led largely by youth, in imitation of the indignados movement in Spain [7].

SYRIZA activists threw themselves wholeheartedly into the movement. Together with forces from ANTARSYA, they provided important organizational and political support to the demonstrations and the assemblies held in the squares—and importantly, they were the ones to play the key role, together with autonomists and anarchists, in organizing assemblies and committees in neighborhoods.

From this point on, the resistance movement carried SYRIZA forward. In quick succession, we saw the “won’t pay” movement in defiance of unjust regressive tax hikes and increases in the cost of public transportation; mobilizations in support of striking workers in a number of sectors; a series of massive general strikes; and the mass demonstrations outside parliament. In Syntagma Square, especially, the role of organized activists was critical in holding protests together despite the constant assaults by police.

Members of the different organizations in SYRIZA and sympathizers with the coalition were active in

all these struggles. At the same time, the hundreds of thousands of people who took part in the strikes, demonstrations and occupations were radicalized. Old illusions about the sanctity of debt repayment, the need for “shared sacrifice” or the impossibility of challenging Memorandum policies dissolved rapidly, as did myths about the EU and PASOK.

All this contributed to SYRIZA adopting a clear left-wing political line. The revolutionary organizations inside SYRIZA and the left wing of Synaspismos played a crucial role in arguing consistently for radical politics and opposing any attempts by the SYN leadership for a moderate turn. But the most powerful ally of the left in this political struggle inside SYRIZA was always the fighting spirit in the streets, the factories, the schools and so on.

### **The slogan of a “left-wing” government**

So there have been two main characteristics of SYRIZA that have helped keep the coalition going during hard times and made it possible to overcome difficult crises.

The first is that SYRIZA is an active force inside the resistance movement, able to influence the direction and strategies of the struggle, and vice versa. The best way to understand the importance of this dynamic is to contrast it with the opposite example—Greece’s Communist Party and its sectarian attitude toward any struggle it can’t control, from the youth revolt of 2008 to the squares movement and so on.

The other characteristic is the relationship of the organizations involved in the alliance. A number of different currents—revolutionary and reformist, Trotskyists, Maoists and Euro-communists—coexist in SYRIZA and manage to work together on the urgent tasks that face us. This clearly has a big appeal to many people and helps explain the depth of support for SYRIZA.

But the attractiveness of the left working together isn’t the only reason that the character of the alliance is important. It also represents a guarantee that SYRIZA’s strategy and tactics will always be fully debated. Discussion about the program and slogans of the coalition is nonstop, and so is the debate between different ideas for strategies. Because of this, SYRIZA can spread its influence, while revolutionaries are guaranteed an opportunity to engage in the alliance, trying to influence its politics and build support for their ideas.

But there is one final factor that catapulted SYRIZA to the position it finds itself in today: its slogan in favor of a “government of the left” that will scrap the Memorandum and roll back the years of austerity measures imposed on Greece [8].

Before the elections this year, SYRIZA was already popular as the most prominent left force that stood by demonstrators when they faced the riot police, and whose activists were present in every struggle. The main parties and the mainstream media accused SYRIZA of being “troublemakers” once again. But this time, the accusations from the establishment were seen as a badge of honor—people wanted to vote for the “troublemakers.”

The slogan in favor of a government of the left took the relationship between the resistance movement and SYRIZA to a new level. SYRIZA dared to confront the blackmail of the mainstream parties by providing an answer to the question: After the bipartisan government of PASOK and New Democracy, then what? This gave confidence to the resistance movement that we can win—by giving expression to the popular will to get rid of the major parties and their policies.

So for the unemployed, for workers, for the youth, SYRIZA wasn’t just the “nice guys” who support



their struggles—it was a force that promised to lead these struggles to victory.

## **What next?**

These are the outlines of the long—and difficult—journey of SYRIZA through the electoral triumph of May 6.

Right now, SYRIZA remains committed to its left-wing direction. It has resisted extreme pressures, both to join a national unity government and to moderate its program.

But we have no illusions about the dangers ahead of us. As we have seen during the history of SYRIZA, the threat of conservative turns by reformist leaders are ever-present. We are fully aware that if SYRIZA wins the election, the pressures on it—from the media, the other Greek parties and the EU blackmailers to be “realistic” while in charge of a state facing bankruptcy—will multiply even further.

But we count on an important counterweight to these pressures, also present throughout the history of SYRIZA. The resistance movement and the rank-and-file supporters of the coalition demand enforcement of the anti-austerity politics they voted for. These people must mobilize in their workplaces, in their universities and in the streets.

The success of the mass assemblies that SYRIZA organized all around Greece in squares and neighborhoods make us optimistic. Collective discussion and action about politics and the economy are back in the streets.

This represents a political earthquake of a similar magnitude to what took place with the May 6 election. The willingness of people to engage in politics, along with the class character of SYRIZA’s vote—for the first time since the 1940s, a left party won the vote among the working class and unemployed—can lead to a further transformation of SYRIZA. The coalition has the potential to go from being a political force of left-wing activists with some appeal among radicalized youth to being a mass political force of the working class.

To confront the challenges ahead of us, the crucial task for DEA is to organize these people—to turn people who supported SYRIZA with their votes into activists. Together with this effort, we need to strengthen the left of SYRIZA so it can successfully confront future challenges—to build up support for revolutionary ideas and politics.

This will become even more vital if we have, on June 18, a left-wing government trying to implement an anti-austerity program against the will of the EU, the international bankers and the Greek ruling class. This scenario will open up a radically new situation and a confrontation between workers and capitalists unseen in many years in Western capitalism.

**Panos Petrou**

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**P.S.**

\* From Socialist Worker (USA):

## Footnotes

- [1] See on ESSF (article 25676), [A new stage of the resistance in Greece](#).
- [2] <http://socialistworker.org/2012/05/09/political-earthquake-in-greece>
- [3] See on ESSF (article 25677), [Greece: Where did SYRIZA come from?](#).
- [4] <http://socialistworker.org/2009/01/05/greece-rises-in-rebellion>
- [5] <http://socialistworker.org/2010/05/07/greeces-workers-revolt>
- [6] <http://socialistworker.org/2010/11/18/greek-local-elections-highlight-crisis>
- [7] <http://socialistworker.org/2011/06/22/struggle-of-the-squares>
- [8] [A new stage of the resistance in Greece](#).