

Greece: Where is Syriza headed?

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The Coalition of the Radical Left, known as SYRIZA, sent shock waves across Greece and internationally last spring when it twice came within a few percentage points of winning national elections. SYRIZA provided an alternative to the drastic austerity championed by Greece's political and business establishment and, behind them, the rulers of Europe.

Earlier this month, SYRIZA held a delegated conference as the first step in a process to establish a more unified organization. Currently, the coalition is made up of more than a dozen left-wing organizations, ranging from revolutionary socialist to radical reform-oriented, along with many unaffiliated individuals who have joined, especially since the elections. The largest of the member groups is Synaspismos, which accounts for most of SYRIZA's current leadership, including Alexis Tsipris, the head of SYRIZA's 71 members of parliament.

Panos Petrou is a leading member of the socialist group Internationalist Workers Left (DEA), one of the groups that co-founded SYRIZA in 2004. Here he reports on what took place at the conference and the political debate that is taking place over its future and direction.

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SYRIZA HELD its first national conference with elected delegates from November 30 to December 2. This was the first step in a months-long process that will end up with a founding Congress, which will hopefully decide on transforming SYRIZA into a more unified political formation in the spring of 2013.

Toward the Conference

SYRIZA headed into the national conference with a campaign to hold local assemblies that established new branches, both by locality or in workplaces, recruited new members and organized political discussion. The coalition now has nearly 500 branches and more than 30,000 members nationwide.

This membership elected 3,000 delegates to the national conference, which in turn elected a new leading body for the coalition. So the most positive aspect of the conference was these important steps toward transforming SYRIZA into a mass organization and the establishment of democratic rights and a voice for the thousands of unaffiliated activists who joined the coalition and are now a majority in SYRIZA.

Of course, the process of organizing and holding the conference was not perfect. There were both objective weaknesses, which were to be expected in the process of what had been a relatively small coalition trying to transform itself into a mass organization, and some political questions that were problematic.

One example was the decision to allow registration of new members with voting rights even during the day of the election of delegates. Many local branches protested, defending the idea that SYRIZA member should be active in order to have a say.

Another example was the draft declaration. The publication of a political document in order to organize political discussion in the branches was very important. But the draft was published very close to the conference, so there was little time for the needed in-depth debate.

The Draft Declaration and the Political Debate About the Future of SYRIZA

The draft declaration was what its name suggests: a draft. This was a work in progress that served as a starting point for a political debate that will continue until the founding congress of SYRIZA.

The draft was very broad and ambiguous, having included all of the different opinions inside SYRIZA. Considering the level of agreement among the various forces in SYRIZA, this was to be expected. But there are some important and urgent reasons to clarify specific issues today.

One such issue is the particular character of the period right now. The coalition government is facing serious problems, and if an election is called, SYRIZA might come to lead a government before its founding Congress in the spring.

Another is the urgent questions we face because the situation is so dire in Greece. There are some issues that are a matter of life and death, both for SYRIZA and the left as a whole, and for the working class. So we need to be adamant on some crucial choices that may have to be made soon.

A third reason is the stance taken by some leading members of Synaspismos recently. As SYRIZA gets closer winning an election and forming a government, the pressures to adjust the coalition's politics in a more "realistic" direction are increasing.

There have been many signs that elements of the leadership of Synaspismos want to pave the way for such a shift. These leading members go beyond the ambiguities in the draft declaration. In their public appearances and in interviews, they will interpret the basic agreement on what unites SYRIZA in order to moderate the politics, or even to contradict that basis of unity.

For these reasons, some forces inside SYRIZA decided to take up the political debate in public, in order to deal with these contentious issues and to insist that SYRIZA members need to be alert in defending the coalition from the potential pressures to moderate its politics.

Thus, before the conference, three left-wing groups within SYRIZA—Internationalist Workers Left (DEA), Kokkino (which means "Red") and the Anti-capitalist Political Group (APO)—published a joint

statement highlighting the most important issues that need to be clarified.

There were other contributions to the debate. For example, the “Left Current” within Synaspismos, the largest minority tendency within the party, together with a smaller tendency known as “Left Regroupment,” proposed two amendments to the draft declaration. One was on the issue of left-wing unity, stating explicitly that our potential allies are on the left—specifically, the Communist Party and ANTARSYA. The other, involving the debt and the eurozone, proposed to further affirm SYRIZA’s clear rejection of all blackmail by the EU to go along with austerity.

The Conference and the Results of Voting

The leadership of Synaspismos tried to head off political discussion—in order to avoid an open debate on the contentious issues mentioned above—so the political differences at the conference were mainly expressed in voting for the new leading body of SYRIZA.

There were two different lists of candidates, with a provision that any delegate could choose a list, but still vote for a limited number of candidates of the other list.

Delegates representing the majority in Synaspismos, those supporting the current leadership and Alexis Tsipras, joined with representatives of other components of SYRIZA, including the Communist Organization of Greece (KOE, a Maoist group), the Renewing Communist Ecological Left (AKOA, which is left eurocommunists), the libertarian communists of the Radical Left Group Roza) and some groups of former PASOK members who have joined SYRIZA.

Together, these forces formed the “United Ballot.” This alliance was in favor of the draft declaration as it stood and generally supported the idea that SYRIZA was moving in the right direction and there were no serious disputes at the present time. It won 75 percent of the votes.

The Left Current and Left Regroupment tendencies in Synaspismos, along with DEA, Kokkino and APO, formed the “Left Platform,” which won 25 percent of the vote.

The Left Platform was formed around an agreement on important issues raised in the documents mentioned above. I would summarize the chief points of the Left Platform as:

- SYRIZA must remain committed to winning a “government of the left,” with appeals to the Communist Party and ANTARSYA for collaboration
- It should only accept a “government of the left” and should rule out support for any coalition government that could include bourgeois parties
- The coalition must continue to stand for an immediate end to payments on the debt and not a single sacrifice made for the sake of the euro.
- SYRIZA must stand for reversing austerity by any means necessary—and putting workers’ needs above the “realistic” proposals to meet the needs of capitalism.

The formation of the Left Platform was an important development at the conference. It claimed the right to express different views inside SYRIZA and discuss them openly in front of members, allies and voters, in contrast to the recent pressures to tone down criticisms—a trap that many comrades with good intentions fell into during the Conference).

The Left Platform also sent a message that any turn toward moderation or shifting SYRIZA’s politics

would face serious internal resistance. This message was intended for many different ears—those of leading members of Synaspismos who wish to adjust the coalition’s program; those of the ruling class, which wishes to tame SYRIZA; and those of comrades of the Communist Party and ANTARSYA, to show that there is a visible and strong left-wing opposition to any attempts for a rightward turn by SYRIZA, one they could make stronger by joining.

A Balanced Account of the Conference

The 25 percent of the vote won by the Left Platform was a very positive starting point for opening up a serious debate inside SYRIZA about the direction of the coalition.

In order to properly evaluate the outcome of the conference, we must keep in mind that the 75 percent of votes won by the United Ballot is not a homogenous block. While the Left Platform tried to express the need for a visible left wing of SYRIZA, this doesn’t mean that the majority of delegates who voted differently are all part of the right wing of the coalition.

The United Ballot included a very wide range of forces, from the most moderate members of Synaspismos who are pushing to adjust SYRIZA’s program toward “realism” to very radical left-wing comrades who may have thought that the best way to move SYRIZA forward was to argue their positions within the framework of the majority or who prioritized the need for the coalition to appear “united.”

In addition, there was an effort among elements of the majority to appeal to rank-and-file members’ desire for unity and the generally optimistic mood of this first conference in order to present the Left Platform as “splitters” who want to argue for no reason. This made it harder for many delegates to support the Left Platform, no matter how much they agreed with its positions.

One indication of this came in the voting on amendments to the draft document proposed by the Left Current and supported by the Left Platform. Both were voted down, but the totals revealed the Platform’s ideas aren’t confined to only 25 percent of SYRIZA. The amendment that insisted on a “government of the left” and that unity should be sought with forces such as the Communist Party and ANTARSYA won the votes of nearly 40 percent of delegates. The amendment on the debt and the eurozone fell just a few votes short of a majority. And this happened despite the polarized climate toward the “splitters” of the Left Platform.

So it clear that neither the conference as a whole, or the 75 percent of delegates who supported the United Ballot gave a mandate to leaders of Synaspismos to move SYRIZA in a more moderate direction. On the contrary, most speeches by delegates clearly tended in a left-wing direction.

But this doesn’t lessen the importance of the effort by the Left Platform to highlight the important issues ahead of us and push them into public discussion. The future of SYRIZA is still an open question.

Where Next for SYRIZA?

The emergence of the Left Platform and the efforts of those who were part of it to open up the political debate set some important precedents for SYRIZA. It established some ground rules for the functioning of a more unified coalition—specifically, the right to criticize the leadership of SYRIZA as necessary, and to express and defend publicly the political differences that exist in the coalition in an organized way, via currents, blocs, lists of candidates and so on. The Left Platform also made it

clear that there is an organized left counterweight to any attempts to shift SYRIZA rightward.

The debate around the choices SYRIZA has to make must now continue on the local level, among the membership of SYRIZA. And most importantly, this debate must be defined by the working-class struggle and the engagement of SYRIZA activists in it. The vital spirit of the resistance movement is the most important ally we can have in the struggle for the direction of SYRIZA, as has been proven many times in the past.

Along with this external factor, there must be a conscious and ongoing strategy among SYRIZA members who supported the Left Platform. At the conference, it was made clear that the forces exist—and the numbers far exceed those who openly supported the Left Platform in voting—to confront any attempts to moderate the program of SYRIZA and push the coalition to the right.

One of our most important tasks is to organize these forces, engage them in social struggles and coordinate them to have a political voice. This can prove to be a most valuable contribution in stopping the dreams of the mass media barons for a SYRIZA that capitulates to moderation in the future.

Our organization DEA has struggled for this purpose for years now, and we will continue to do so, along with the comrades who agreed on the contribution we published together with Kokkino and APO; those with whom we formed the Left Platform; and any comrade who is willing to struggle for a real working-class alternative to the crisis of capitalism.

The road ahead of us won't be easy, but it is clear that the future of the Greek left and the class struggle in Greece will be shaped in critical ways by the direction taken by SYRIZA. The battle for that direction is a battle no one should abstain from.

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P.S.

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