

Keeping the flame of resistance lit in Greece - The coming elections are taking place at a critical turning point

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Presentation

Greece's left has formed a new alliance called Popular Unity in the aftermath of former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' capitulation to the European authorities and the call for new elections set for Sunday, September 20. The initial core of Popular Unity was the SYRIZA members from the Left Platform who resigned from the party over Tsipras' betrayal. Together with others on the left, both from SYRIZA and those who were outside it, they now plan to continue the struggle to overthrow the so-called Memorandums of austerity policies, starting with a campaign in the upcoming elections.

Panos Petrou is a member of the Greek socialist group Internationalist Workers Left, which was a co-founder of SYRIZA, a supporter of the Red Network and Left Platform within SYRIZA, and now of Popular Unity. In this speech, recorded in Athens for a presentation at a national conference of the Movement for Socialism (MPS/BFS) in Switzerland on September 12-13, he explains, from DEA's point of view, the course of events dating back to the early 2000s that led to the current situation. His speech was translated into English by Todd Chretien and were edited and abridged for publication.

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AS YOU know, at this time, an important electoral battle is unfolding. As you also know, the comrades of DEA are taking part in this battle within the ranks of a new formation called Popular Unity.

These elections are taking place at a critical turning point: the end of one political period and the beginning of another for Greece as well as for the left. In speaking about the end of one period, we are speaking of the end of SYRIZA. This must be clearly understood. The SYRIZA "brand" remains because Alexis Tsipras aims to keep it alive. But SYRIZA as we knew it, as the Coalition of the Radical Left, has collapsed. What remains of SYRIZA is being rapidly transformed into a new type of party, a social-liberal, pro-Memorandum party.

MY FIRST point today is to offer a preliminary evaluation of this SYRIZA experience. DEA was a founding member organization of SYRIZA in 2004. At that point, we conceived of SYRIZA as a very important experience, an important formation to relate to because it guaranteed united action between different currents on the Greek left, which has traditionally been highly fragmented. SYRIZA presented the opportunity for different sorts of currents—be they reformists or

revolutionaries of Maoist, Eurocommunist and Trotskyist traditions—to unite.

We also understood that we needed a formation that could give political expression to the social movements. This was during an epoch of radicalization against neoliberalism, against the war, against racism, which was being expressed through the medium of the Social Forum movement. This was true as much for older activists, who had retreated from politics during the 1990s, but whose hopes were being restored, as it was for a new generation of activists who came mainly from the antiwar movement and the movement against capitalist globalization, but who could not be integrated into any of the existing groups on the Greek left.

Another important element in the creation of SYRIZA lay in the fact that it was a political coalition of the left—the left of the left—which clearly rejected the strategy of the center-left. At the time, that was an important debate in the heart of the European left. When I refer to the center-left strategy, it should be understood as an alliance with the European social-democratic parties. SYRIZA represented a rupture with this strategy.

For many years after its founding, SYRIZA was an effective instrument for this line. For instance, SYRIZA was one expression in parliament of the student movement in 2006-07, which was characterized by a massive wave of occupations against privatization. SYRIZA actively supported the youth revolt in December 2008 and was the only party in parliament to condemn police violence. SYRIZA was active in the movement to occupy the central squares in 2011, after the onset of the economic crisis, offering significant political and organizational support. And finally, of course, SYRIZA took part in the great movement of strikes by the working class in 2010-12.

SYRIZA was capable of linking together the social movements as the crisis escalated in Greece, and in our opinion, the level of social struggle in Greece was the highest in Europe during these years, propelling SYRIZA into a position to achieve governmental power. At the same time, this situation had a twofold dynamic: the class struggle in Greece contributed to the rise of SYRIZA, but it was the relationship between militants in SYRIZA and the social movements that, in turn, made this possible.

SYRIZA was able to give expression to social and political resistance, as well as fashion a political alternative for the movement against the austerity Memorandums, by putting forth the objective and the slogan of “a government of the left,” which promised to cancel the Memorandums and reverse austerity.

At the height of the movement in 2012, we witnessed the whole system, the mass media, the bourgeois parties, all the state mechanisms attack SYRIZA in a manner reminiscent of the Cold War. They saw SYRIZA as the single greatest obstacle to imposing stability in favor of the Memorandums. They understood that the perspective of a government of the left could open the way to a vast political confrontation.

The question was: Which parts of SYRIZA believed in this perspective? And this brings me to my second point.

SOME IN SYRIZA tended to avoid confrontations that might get out of control and threaten a government of the left. Their strategy was defined by parliamentarism. That is to say, they placed a very heavy emphasis on parliamentary means for conducting politics. They sought governmental power by any means necessary, understanding this power not as a means by which to realize certain objectives, as DEA saw it, but as the end goal in itself. Their strategy was likewise defined by an effort to build bridges with the state machine, with the establishment, hoping to avoid a major confrontation with it.

One trait very particular to Greek reformism is its Europeanism. These forces are convinced that we must remain within the European Union—I would even say they believe in the eurozone by any means necessary. They limit themselves to what the existing European institutions allow us to do.

This was not the official strategy of SYRIZA. Decisions made at the SYRIZA Congress pertaining to the strategy of a government of the left were much more radical. Be that as it may, this Europeanist strategy was imposed on the party. In reality, it neutralized the party.

This process began before the electoral victory as it became clear that SYRIZA was coming close to attaining governmental power, and it was greatly accelerated after the election on January 25 when SYRIZA came to office.

The election was an important moment for the Greek working class, which took to the streets to celebrate, hoping that the government of the left would reverse austerity, annul the Memorandums, and open up new paths for society. However, the leading group around Tsipras pursued the strategic tendency that I described above—and did so in the most anti-democratic manner. All internal party procedures were suspended, the leadership never listened to the voices of rank-and-file party members, and power was concentrated in the hands of small circles close to the government.

You are probably familiar with the criticisms expressed at each stage of what followed, between January 25 and July 13, when the new Memorandum was announced—I won't go into all the details here. But in short, there were consequences from the limits of the government's strategy. Its Europeanism and parliamentarism, its decision to take the path of negotiations—these defined the ways in which the SYRIZA government operated from its January victory until July.

This was the strategy that collapsed on July 13 when Tsipras signed the new Memorandum. All the attempts by the leaders of SYRIZA to conclude what they called an honorable compromise failed. That was how we have been led to a permanent retreat from the original radical positions of SYRIZA, all the way to the signing of a new Memorandum.

Despite these developments, the first thing to say is that we believe DEA's participation in the founding of SYRIZA—of being a member of a party that put forward the goal of a government of the left—was absolutely valuable.

Despite its bitter ending, the existence of SYRIZA itself was a victory for Europe and the Greek working class. It was this that opened the door to important advances in the Greek class struggle, of which the most important was the historic July 5 referendum—with the great victory for the “no” vote of 61 percent, despite all the blackmail and threats. That was a tremendous political moment in Greek history, and it would not have been possible without SYRIZA's victory on January 25.

The pain suffered during these seven months of government have also raised the political consciousness of a large part of the Greek working class in terms of how to fight for the end of austerity and against the limits of the eurozone. This rise in consciousness could not have been brought about without the years of revolutionary propaganda on the part of various groups. But then, it might not have happened with just the years of revolutionary propaganda alone—without the living experience of these seven months.

This bitter ending was not predetermined. It was not a given. Things might have gone in another direction, and there were many other alternatives to the official line. We did not have the strength to impose a different course on the government. A different course depended on forces much broader than DEA and other left-wing currents—it required broader social forces from within the working-class movement. That is how we must evaluate the past months' course in order to try to change the

future course.

THE THIRD point is that if we judge this experience with SYRIZA to have been valuable up until now, it is only because today, we have the potential to fight for an alternative. It is this engagement within SYRIZA that created the conditions for the left's survival—to be able to be visible in society as a large force.

Here, we are not talking about anything other than an initial assessment of a very important experience in which we have been engaged for more than 10 years. After the coming elections on September 20, there is going to be a big debate, in great detail and with more concrete assessments about what has happened and what has not worked. This will take place not only for the radical left in general, but DEA comrades will also have time to discuss it inside our organization and in our conferences.

But I will say briefly that one positive aspect of all this is that after 10 years of work in SYRIZA, we are more mature as a revolutionary group. We have learned a lot from discussions with people who do not share our same traditions, both in terms of politics and tactics. We have emerged from this experience with a much larger audience. We have new relationships, new links with activists and comrades who are very precious to us from different currents.

We have survived SYRIZA's crash. On the contrary, in my opinion, we are leaving SYRIZA in solid shape, stronger than when we entered. We are leaving SYRIZA in the midst of a great debate about how we should understand these past 10 years, as well as considering possible mistakes. But I am convinced that in leaving SYRIZA, two choices we made have been fully vindicated.

The first was a refusal to dissolve our organization into a unified party. The decision to maintain our organizational, ideological and political independence, our freedom to express our own opinions and our ability to organize freely, was right.

The second decision was the attempt to build a left opposition inside SYRIZA in the most determined manner. We made the choice to build the Left Platform at the time of the 2013 founding Congress, but we also have tried to rally the broadest possible spectrum of oppositional voices against the leadership in more recent years, particularly over the past seven months.

Additionally, we took the initiative to create the Red Network, which is a network of activists that isn't exclusively composed of DEA members, but sought to gather around DEA a large group of people who believed that it was necessary to oppose the SYRIZA leadership's strategy.

THE IMMEDIATE results of our activity, in particular over the last seven months, are that, when the crisis hit SYRIZA, we had the capacity to respond. Other currents, including many excellent activists, found themselves in a state of shock. We were able to respond immediately to the collapse of the party. We spoke of the creation, in its place, of Popular Unity, and that this could be accomplished as an organized bloc, even as the crisis escalated.

The second outcome is that because of the decisions we have made over the last several months, we have built relations with a very large group of activists from beyond the Left Platform.

We have succeeded in building fraternal relations with important parts of the SYRIZA majority itself—for instance, with the Group of 53, the name used to refer to members of the SYRIZA Central Committee who opposed parts of Tsipras' program. We have also successfully maintained connections and good relations with the non-sectarian component parts of the anti-capitalist alliance ANTARSYA. All this is very useful for the initiatives we are taking in the wake of the SYRIZA crisis.

Another result is that after these seven months, we managed to build and enlarge the Red Network. Now we can truly speak of a network of activists, with a national base, from which its members and sympathizers are trying to build into a stronger force. This is a very important success that did not simply appear. It was a hard-fought gain over the course of these last months.

Back in February, when we were fighting against Tsipras' decision to nominate a right-wing president of the republic, our member of parliament Ioanna Gaitani was the only one to oppose this.

After that, we said that the initial February 20 agreement that Tsipras signed with the creditors was a trap to lead SYRIZA to social-liberal tactics, and we were also in the minority. Many good activists on the left argued that this wasn't the case—that we were too extreme, that we should have more confidence in the leadership. We insisted, warning members of SYRIZA of our criticisms. We argued that the path taken by the leadership could lead to a crisis—to a new Memorandum.

When this turned out to be the case, many SYRIZA activists came around, and we were able, despite our small size, to organize mass events against the signing of the new agreement. Hundreds of people participated in them. Our last big event not only gathered together important figures from various traditions and currents of the left opposition to the leadership, but it also brought together hundreds of activists wishing to discuss and listen to ideas about how to deal with the Memorandum signed by Tsipras.

I NOW want to turn to focus on this new political formation: Popular Unity.

Briefly, Popular Unity has been constituted as a coalition—as an alliance of political groups and organizations, non-affiliated people, people who were active in the campaign for a “no” vote in the July 5 referendum.

Its most important component is the Left Current, which was the largest component of the Left Platform within SYRIZA. DEA and the Red Network are important, too, but so are currents that have left ANTARSYA and have also joined Popular Unity, as well as other far-left organizations that have decided to support this new initiative. For instance, one part of the old-left majority within SYRIZA supports us critically and is in discussion with Popular Unity.

Well-known public figures are also supportive, such as Zoe Konstantopoulou, who served as president of the parliament for SYRIZA before she resigned in protest of the new Memorandum, and Manolis Glézos, the 93-year-old Greek resistance fighter.

Popular Unity isn't a finished project. It doesn't have a detailed program. Popular Unity aims to hold the line with an anti-austerity program, to reverse austerity measures, to stop payments to the creditors, to annul the public debt, nationalize the banks and the public enterprises that have been privatized in order to place them under public and workers' control, tax the rich, redistribute wealth in favor of the poor, etc. Popular Unity also understands, after the experience of the last months, that in order to achieve these goals, a confrontation with the eurozone and the EU is the most likely scenario.

Popular Unity was an immediate response to a crisis of the left. Unfortunately, it was created in a rushed manner in light of the elections being called for September 20, but there was no other way.

The main objective at the moment for Popular Unity is to avoid the Italian scenario—that is to say, to avoid what happened to the Italian left after the collapse of the Romano Prodi center-left government and the subsequent collapse of the Party of Communist Refoundation that supported Prodi (PRC by its initials in Italian). PRC support for Prodi led to a fragmentation on the left, which continues to this day. Those who continue on in very small groups are trying to rebuild.

We are trying to create, as we put it, a refuge for all left-wing activists betrayed by SYRIZA who want to keep up the fight that SYRIZA began. Our main objective is to keep the flame of resistance alive, especially for those who voted “no” in the referendum and are now faced with a new Memorandum.

We need a left voice to speak against this new Memorandum, just as we spoke up against the old ones. We need the left to continue this fight—a fight which was cut short by the SYRIZA leadership.

THIS IS the main challenge regarding these upcoming elections. They are crucial—they will set the terms for the next political period. It is no accident that German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that these elections, even though they were called so soon after the January elections, are not a problem for Europe, but are part of the solution.

That’s how we know that the ruling class and its international allies are hoping that these elections will bring to power a government committed to imposing the new Memorandum, which will be able to overcome popular anger and resistance against the new austerity agreement. Their objective is to construct a new consensus around the Memorandum. In reality, they want to impose Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal dogma—that There Is No Alternative (TINA) for Greek society.

This is what we are struggling against—this is the challenge we face and the importance of Popular Unity in these elections. The new Memorandum is a disaster for Greek society—it will bring reductions of pensions, privatization and a complete surrender of all authority to the creditors. It will determine each legislative point discussed in the Greek parliament.

But we also know that social resistance against this new Memorandum was quite weak. It was signed during the summer, when Greeks are traditionally on vacation. The elections coming so soon after August—and the overall situation in the EU—didn’t make for the best situation for the social movements.

Moreover, Greek society is still in shock. There is a sense of betrayal and a tendency toward cynicism because the situation is very difficult. It is therefore hard to predict the course of a resistance movement against austerity. However, since the battle has been declared by Tsipras, these elections will be very important.

Because of the “no” vote against austerity, opposition to the Memorandum is being heard publicly in the policy debates. And, of course, popular anger created a political crisis for the system that the ruling class is now trying to stabilize.

We see that the Independent Greeks (ANEL, by their initials in Greek—this right-wing populist party was a junior partner in the SYRIZA-led government after January) are falling apart because they voted in favor of the Memorandum. Many small parties favorable to the Memorandums have collapsed. We are headed into an election campaign featuring a sharp polarization between New Democracy and SYRIZA. But both parties are having trouble increasing their electoral support.

One of the greatest crimes of the Tsipras leadership in SYRIZA is that it has made a right-wing victory possible in the coming elections. The right-wing parties were humiliated by their support for previous Memorandums. But now SYRIZA is going along with the new Memorandum, thereby facilitating the work of New Democracy.

In this very difficult situation, we must give political expression to the “no” vote—a political expression for people who maintain that the “no” was not beaten, that the struggle will continue. If we do that, if we move in this direction, we will have a better starting point to enable the social movements to emerge again.

Unfortunately, with respect to this goal, the Communist Party is no help at all. They continue down their sectarian path of previous years when they concentrated their main attacks on SYRIZA. Now they are turning their attacks against Popular Unity, hoping to win some extra votes as left critics of SYRIZA.

Another reason Popular Unity is important is that we do not want the “no” vote to benefit the fascists of Golden Dawn. Fortunately, the polls show that they are getting a similar level of support as in previous elections. The people who voted for SYRIZA do not seem to be giving their votes to Golden Dawn. The presence of Popular Unity is an important factor in making sure this doesn’t happen.

So Golden Dawn is trying a new tactic—it is trying to present itself as a respectable force in order to win the confidence of the ruling class. Its leader, Nikólaos Michaliákos, declared that the party opposes leaving the eurozone, leaving the EU, etc. The fascists are trying to build links with the ruling class and secure electoral gains in this way.

They are also having problems promoting their racist agenda. They are trying to manipulate the so-called “refugee crisis” in their favor by organizing small groups who attack the refugees. But apart from a few incidents, even with the support of the riot police, they haven’t been able to win over any large-scale support.

On the subject of the refugees, the sentiment of solidarity is what predominates. There are solidarity actions initiated from below, including even support from small businesses. Our main task is to organize solidarity action, but we are also demanding papers for migrants, and we demand that the state take care of these people. It is also a great opportunity for us to lead a discussion on the need to tear down the walls of Fortress Europe.

I WILL conclude with my assessment of the period that will follow the elections. It is difficult to make predictions—the situation is very fluid, both politically and socially.

The main struggle will be against TINA—the idea that “there is no alternative” to austerity. This feeling may make certain gains because of the shock and betrayal consummated by the signing of the new Memorandum by SYRIZA. We will see despair on one side, based on the reality of harsh austerity measures, which form part of the new Memorandum.

But on the other, these measures are most likely going to produce resistance. It remains to be seen how this will develop and how the different kinds of fightbacks will take to the streets, as was the case in 2010-12. In all this, Popular Unity is going to have a very important role to play, no matter what the results of the elections in September are. This brings us to the subject of what happens the “day after” the elections.

Our attitude toward Popular Unity is that it must salvage the positive aspects of the SYRIZA experience—its united front policy, its attempts to reach the masses, etc.—but we must abandon what has not worked, its mistakes. We must politically strengthen this new political formation, by which we mean that Popular Unity’s political program must be animated by an anti-capitalist perspective. We need an anti-capitalist left with a socialist orientation.

With respect to this new formation, we in DEA believe that we must raise issues such as anti-racism, anti-fascism and internationalism. This will be an open discussion. We are fighting to keep Popular Unity in close contact with social movements. And we also argue that Popular Unity activists should be the people who initiate new resistance movements in our workplaces, our neighborhoods.

Last but not least, following the elections, we will push to make what is now a new political front a

more effective and democratic organization. We know that party democracy and the experience of it being smothered is critical for explaining what took place inside SYRIZA, and we do not want to repeat that. The only way to united social radicalization, based on the experience of the referendum, is through more democracy.

Popular Unity must be built from the bottom up. We will carry out this fight alongside many other comrades, both inside and outside Popular Unity, so that it may be a success. We do not know exactly how all this will take place, but we believe we are very well positioned, after all the months of struggle inside SYRIZA, to influence this new formation. We will play an active role in defining it so that it adopts an anti-capitalist, anti-racist and internationalist character, and that it is built from below.

This is the main emphasis in the weeks and months after the elections. It is on this perspective that we will focus all our efforts in the coming period.

Panos Petrou

P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2015/09/18/keeping-the-flame-of-resistance-lit-in-greece>

* Translated by Todd Chretien.