

Greece's real battle comes after election

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It's a cliché but it's nevertheless true that the eyes of the world are on Greece. I get feverish updates of the latest opinion poll from revolutionary Marxists and bourgeois economists alike.

The reason is simple. The election on 6 May revealed that the mass of the Greek people rejected the austerity programme imposed under the Memorandum of Understanding between their government and the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The main vehicle for this rejection proved to be Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left. Its leader Alex Tsipras has denounced the programme as "barbarous". His refusal to form a coalition with the parties that support the Memorandum has forced Greece into a second election on 17 June.

According to the polls, Syriza and the main party of the Greek right, New Democracy, are in a close race for first place. The stakes are very high. If Syriza formed a government that rejected the Memorandum, the European Central Bank might well react by ceasing to fund the Greek banks, precipitating Greece's full default on its foreign debts and departure from the eurozone.

But Syriza isn't the only force on the radical left. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) is one of the biggest surviving Stalinist organisations, with deep roots in the organised working class.

It is also very sectarian. Aleka Papariga, the KKE general secretary, refused to meet Syriza after the last election. Its vote is being squeezed, and deservedly so.

There is also Antarsya, the Front of the Anti-Capitalist Left. This is a coalition of far left organisations, some from Maoist and Trotskyist backgrounds. Its two most important constituents are the New Left Current (NAR), a breakaway from the KKE, and the Socialist Workers Party (SEK), Greek sister organisation of the British SWP.

Distinctive

Antarsya has a distinctive programme which calls for Greece to default on its debt, nationalise the banks, cut the working day, and leave the euro. Syriza, in sharp contrast, is dominated by Synaspismos, representing the pro-EU wing of the Greek Communist movement.

Antarsya won 1.2 percent in the elections—an advance on its previous performance but not enough to get into parliament. It is standing again. But there have been numerous calls for it to withdraw, some from inside Greece, many from outside.

The critics—including some who agree with Antarsya's call for a break with the eurozone—argue that in office Syriza will move left and take on the EU. Maybe this will happen, but I don't see why one should count on it.

Interviewed on Channel 4 News on Thursday last week Tsipras said that, faced with a Syriza-led government, Germany and its allies would back down. This isn't the message of IMF managing director Christine Lagarde, who announced in a callous interview in last Saturday's Guardian that it's "payback time" for Greece.

Much of this discussion takes place in an electoral vacuum. Since December 2008 Greece has blazed with the fiercest social struggles Europe has seen in a generation. Austerity has provoked 17 general strikes plus many more national and local strikes, and occupations.

This is what pushed Greece to the left. Syriza has benefitted electorally but it hasn't led the anti-austerity movement. Trade unions have traditionally been controlled by Pasok, the Greek equivalent of Labour, though its dominance has now collapsed. Activists from the KKE and Antarsya have been much more important on the ground.

I don't expect Antarsya to get a big vote. But its presence in the elections will provide a political voice for some of those leading the real struggle—which must now include a big push against the fascists of Golden Dawn. Antarsya has made it clear that it sees itself working alongside and in dialogue with those who support Syriza.

The stronger its voice is, the greater the pressure will be on Syriza to stand firm in the face of the forces trying to impose austerity as Greece's permanent condition.

The decisive battles will take place after the polls have closed, and here Antarsya will have a big part to play.

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P.S.

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