

Background to Greece's radical left after Syriza - The Greek Social Forum, DEA, Popular Unity

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On 15 January 2015, Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left, was elected in Greece. There was immense hope that this new government would finally stand up to the European Union and defend working class living standards so ravaged by the economic crisis and the punishing memorandums.

But by July of that year, prime minister Alexis Tsipras had capitulated, signing up to a new (third) memorandum. The attacks on workers, the poor and immigrants have continued unabated.

Red Flag's Liz Walsh spoke to Antonis Davanellos, a member of the editorial committee of the Greek socialist newspaper Workers' Left and a member of Internationalist Workers' Left (DEA), to draw a balance sheet of their intervention in Syriza as well as the challenges ahead for rebuilding the struggles against austerity and racism and reconstituting a radical left on a firmer foundation.

Liz Walsh - Given Syriza proved unequal to the task of stopping austerity, was building a broad party involving different currents from the radical left, including revolutionary and reformist forces, worth it? Was the fight for a left government the correct path to take?

Antonis Davanellos - Syriza was founded in early 2004. Its foundation was based on the previous accumulated experience of the Greek Social Forum (GSF), which was a united front in the social movements. It united in action forces with different ideological traditions and backgrounds (as we would say: reformists, centrists and revolutionary Marxists).

It was a time of intense capitalist aggression, a time of crisis of the traditional left, a time of decline in the strength of the trade unions and social organisations. In this situation, the GSF managed to organise a wave of big mobilisations against neoliberalism and massive anti-war protests. The GSF was the main form that the international movement against neoliberal capitalist globalisation took in Greece.

At the same time, the GSF was an affirmation of the value of the united front, provoking a refreshing debate in the Greek left, in which Stalinist traditions remained strong.

After the events in Genoa in 2001, a debate started in all the European left around the issue of if and how we could express in the political struggle the unity in action we had already established in the

streets. It was clear that this included the prospect of a common intervention in the elections. In 2004, we accepted this challenge, taking part in the foundation of Syriza.

Syriza was the Greek form of the general international debate about “broad parties” of the radical left. While accepting the challenge and participating in Syriza, DEA held a view on broad parties that was different from the prevailing current of that time, as expressed for example by certain sections of the Fourth International.

First, we did not consider broad parties as the “final answer” to the question of the party. We understood them as a transitional process in very specific conditions, in the background of a crisis of the resistance movement and the left.

Second, for this reason, we never promised and we never accepted the dissolution of our organisation. And we never downgraded our own independent “tools” of building and maintaining political relations with the people (newspaper, journal, meetings, public events).

Third, from the beginning we argued publicly for the need for an organised left wing current inside Syriza. DEA, despite enjoying the respect and the appreciation of a broad layer of Syriza members, never joined the leading majority – not even during the more “radical” phase of Alexis Tsipras.

This approach proved to be of extreme value at the time of the crisis. It – partly – explains the speed of the reaction of the left wing of Syriza in 2015, in comparison with what had happened, for example, in Brazil or Italy.

During these 11 years, the experience of Syriza contributed to the creation of a wide layer of political activists in Greece. This layer is stronger in quantity than in many other countries in Europe. This layer is also stronger in political quality: it is trained in political struggle and it has overcome the infantile disorder of dispersing forces in “social movementism”.

This is the reason we – who confronted aggressively the politics of the Syriza government – defend the experience of Syriza’s first period of radical action.

We believe that this layer of political activists has not said its final word. We believe that these people will lead the struggles against the Tsipras government and will play a very important role in the configuration of the new situation, in shaping the “post- Syriza” era.

The Tsipras government, after it signed the third memorandum with the creditors, is implementing typical neoliberal policies. It is cutting wages, pensions and social benefits; it is pushing forward privatisations and creating a more “flexible” industrial relations system. With these reactionary economic policies, the Tsipras government is also unable to implement even the most elementary democratic reforms, which have no financial cost. It has to rely on the repressive apparatus of the state in order to rule.

The question of the “government of the left” was always a thorny issue for revolutionary Marxists. The first time it was proposed as a strategy inside Syriza, in 2008, we rejected it as a parliamentary-reformist strategy, and it was not accepted. Everything changed with the outbreak of the crisis and mostly with the massive struggles of 2010-11. Back then, the people were struggling with massive and tenacious action to overthrow the memorandums, and they understood that in order to achieve that goal, they had to overthrow the government.

But despite the scale of the struggles and the persistence of the masses, there was not (or not yet) a revolutionary situation in Greece: the confrontation had not reached the level of “a struggle of life or death”, the confrontation didn’t have the clear shape of a “struggle of one class against the other”,

and the working class lacked its own independent social organisations that could claim actual power. These limitations “deflected” the will for overthrow towards claiming a government of the left, even through an electoral victory.

It was obligatory for us to accept this context and seek for the most radical political line within it. So we reintroduced in public debate the discussions about the government of the left that were had out in the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, which understood it as a transitional policy towards socialist emancipation.

We fought towards this direction and we developed all our tactical movements along this line. This allowed us to remain steady in our working class orientation and sustain the respect for our organisation by both a broad layer of the rank and file of Syriza and by activists outside Syriza.

Today, our self-criticism on the slogan of a government of the left consists mainly of two points.

The first has to do with objective factors. It was proven that a transitional policy that includes a government of the left presupposes a higher level of direct political intervention of the masses through their own social organisations than the one we had in Greece in 2015.

The second has to do with subjective factors: the balance of power between reformists and revolutionaries in the party and in the social movement. The project of a “government of the left” presupposes a much bigger political determination for confrontation than was held by Syriza as a whole in 2015.

It is important to note that DEA never claimed in public that Syriza would actually manage to carry through the “government of the left” project in a successful, genuine way. For us, this slogan was rather an ideological framework for our actions – actions that included the confrontation with the leading group around Tsipras inside Syriza – than an estimate of what would finally happen.

In the midst of major events, ideas are always important, even if they “lie under the surface”. At the time of the crucial test, the leading majority of Syriza brought its Euro-communist background to the surface and turned to this set of ideas.

The Tsipras government capitulated so quickly because it refused to confront the local ruling class during the crucial first six months of 2015 and because it had the illusion that it was possible to achieve a consensual solution through negotiations with the EU, reversing the pre-existing position of Syriza and changing it to “remaining in the eurozone at all costs”. The result of these two major retreats was the signing of the third memorandum by Alexis Tsipras.

During the first Syriza government, your organisation played a central role in stiffening the resolve of the left within Syriza, such as the Left Current, to oppose the capitulation. Out of the mess of Syriza, a new political party, Popular Unity (LAE) was formed to keep alive the hope that there is an alternative to the path taken by Syriza.

What is the mood among the working class and what is LAE’s orientation to both fostering resistance to austerity and building the forces of the left? And what is LAE’s position on EU membership? Whilst in Syriza, DEA’s slogan was “No sacrifice for the euro, no illusions in the drachma”. Has this now changed after the experience of Syriza?

In 2013, DEA together with the Left Current (the left wing tendency of the party of Synaspismos), founded the Left Platform (LP) in Syriza. The LP was the centre of resistance against Tsipras, and the centre of the rapid and massive split in the summer of 2015, when around 50 percent of the members and cadre of the party followed us out of Syriza.

The LP co-founded Popular Unity (LAE by its Greek initials) with two organisations that left Antarsya. In the September 2015 elections, LAE failed to elect its own parliamentary group, gathering 2.9 percent of the vote instead of the 3 percent that is the threshold to enter the parliament. It was a failure that can be attributed to the extremely small time we had at our disposal (around 20 days to organise a “new party” and an electoral campaign), and mostly to the unanimous slanders by the mass media against the “left wing of Syriza”, which called us “dangerous adventurers”.

A few months later, around 5,000 organised activists participated in the founding conference of LAE. It is clear that LAE gathers the largest part of the organised anti-memorandum left in Greece, outside the ranks of the Communist Party.

It is worth saying a few things about the evolution of the Communist Party. Its leadership appears to be implementing a left turn in the field of ideas (it is talking about socialism, it rejects the strategy of intermediate “stages”, it is reviewing critically the history of the party, reopening the debate about its strategy during the resistance in 1940-44 and the ensuing civil war). But this is happening mostly in order to preclude any collaboration with other left wing forces, any kind of joint action even in the smallest things. So this looks more like the Stalinist policy of the Third Period than a return to genuine Marxist politics.

Inside LAE, DEA argues for a democratic organisational form, which would enable other forces to join ranks with it, including Antarsya and other forces that left Syriza. We are trying, yet again, to build a “common current of the anti-memorandum radical left”.

But we are trying this in a different political situation.

The rapidness of Syriza’s capitulation (the swift turn from the “No” in the referendum to “Yes” a few days later) and the cynicism of governmental policy after that, have provoked demoralisation in a wide part of the people. The collapse of confidence in Syriza has been rapid, but for now it is silent. It is not expressed with a rise in active participation in mobilisations, but with a turn to the individual struggle to survive in the midst of the crisis.

Even for the smallest mobilisation to happen, a much bigger organised effort from the political forces of the left is needed. The contribution of LAE to this is obvious. Through our previous actions, we have inherited a common program of goals against austerity: defend wages and pensions, fight against flexibility, against privatisations, against foreclosures of houses of indebted poor people etc.

LAE also unanimously supports the nationalisation-socialisation of the banks and the suspension of debt repayments, with the goal of cancelling the debt. These are crucial “nodes” for a needed transitional program of reversing austerity towards socialism.

But new questions always emerge. You asked about our older slogan “No sacrifices for the euro - no illusions in the drachma”. It was an “algebraic” slogan at the time of the rise of Syriza. When faced with the rigid position of the creditors and the EU leaders, who demanded many more sacrifices, we then had to radicalise the slogan and support openly and clearly an exit from the eurozone, as a necessary precondition to reverse austerity and cancel the memorandums. LAE is also in unanimous agreement about this position.

But while exiting the eurozone is indeed a necessary precondition, this doesn’t mean that it is enough for a left wing, working class program. We argue that an exit from the eurozone and a confrontation with the EU leaders would have emancipatory content only if combined with a wider program of anti-capitalist measures that lead to socialism. Other comrades inside LAE believe that

an exit from the eurozone is an objectively progressive solution, as it paves the way for the Greek economy to begin growing, which would objectively create bigger potentialities for the workers and the popular classes.

In a way, this is a rehashing of the controversy between supporters of revolutionary socialist strategy and supporters of the “national independence” strategy, meaning the strategy of “intermediate stages”, which occurred in the left in the 1960s and 1970s. Such a discussion is now under way inside LAE.

This debate becomes even more important in the wake of the Brexit vote, the rise of Le Pen in France and the referendum in Italy. Certain fractions of the ruling classes in Europe seem to be losing confidence in the eurozone and turning toward protectionism and policies of “national preference”. This trend is obviously enhanced by the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the USA.

In Greece, there is no serious fraction of the capitalist class that envisages better prospects outside the eurozone or argues for a return to the drachma. But this can change, because the crisis of Greek capitalism is extremely deep, because everyone knows that the third memorandum leads to a dead end, and because many capitalists are afraid that at the end of the road of “internal devaluation” inside the eurozone lies, not some reward from the creditors, but bankruptcy and expulsion from the eurozone. The first voices, from deep inside the establishment, about the need to prepare for all these eventualities are already being raised in the press.

Syriza has also signed up to participate in the European Union’s attempts to create a fortress Europe by rounding up refugees into camps and deporting many back to Turkey. Can you describe the situation for refugees inside Greece and particularly on the Islands? Across Europe we’ve seen the rise of parties of the far right. Has Golden Dawn been able to capitalise on the disappointment with Syriza and the refugee crisis?

The fate of the refugees was determined by the reactionary, racist agreement between the EU, Turkey and Greece. It is worth noting that in order to “oversee” the implementation of the agreement, a battle fleet of NATO has established its presence in the Aegean Sea (mostly due to the insistence of the Tsipras government) and is also keeping an eye on the situation in Syria and on the Russian warships that are stationed in the eastern Mediterranean.

The agreement assigns Turkey responsibility for holding the majority of the refugees within its borders. It is also “caging” some refugees (more than 60,000) within Greece, making their efforts to reach Central Europe and ultimately Western Europe extremely difficult. In order to deter refugees from entering Greece, it organises an abhorrent reception here: they are rounding them up in isolated camps, mostly in the islands, providing no hope or prospects.

During the harshest days of this winter, the situation in the camps became completely unbearable. There have been revolts against both the horrible conditions and against some racist attacks that were organised by the far right.

In a country that every summer welcomes 21 million tourists, the government claims that it’s hard to offer decent hospitality to 60,000 people! The positive thing is that, despite all this, a large part of the Greek population shows determined solidarity.

Today, for the organised anti-racist movement, the main tasks are: First, to change the situation in the camps by imposing a democratic-social control of the conditions there, and to push for the transfer of the refugees to open, decent spaces of hospitality, inside the cities. Second, to demand that refugee children be accepted with full rights in public schools, and also that refugees have full

access to health care in public hospitals. Third, to oppose Golden Dawn and the far right's efforts to organise a racist backlash.

Golden Dawn's leadership and many of its militants are on trial, accused of being members of a criminal organisation. As a consequence, they have retreated carefully: their "storm troopers" were withdrawn from the streets, and there was a drastic decline in incidents of racist violence.

But the massive disillusionment in Syriza is providing new opportunities for Golden Dawn. It consistently comes third in the political polls, with an estimated 8 percent of the vote. The leadership is trying to exploit this opportunity with a parliamentary turn: they present a more "respectable" profile, they talk mostly as "nationalists" and not as neo-Nazis, trying to instil in supporters a belief that there is a prospect of a playing a role in a future government. But this turn also causes tensions within Golden Dawn.

At the same time, a wide range of other far right politicians are launching initiatives to establish a broad nationalist party, one that will be able to cooperate with New Democracy if the handling of the crisis in Greece requires a government of the "hard right".

Our task is not to sit back and make predictions about the evolution of the neo-Nazis and the far right. We must continue to mobilise to break Golden Dawn, an organisation that is a serious threat to the workers' movement and the left. And the best way to do this is to connect the anti-fascist struggle with the struggle to reverse austerity and cancel the memorandums.

P.S.

* "Greece's radical left after Syriza":
<https://redflag.org.au/node/5653>