

The crisis of the Greek government and the role of the “left”

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The conservative government in Greece led by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis is coming under increasing pressure. With the student protests that erupted at the beginning of December following the police killing of a 15-year-old youth ebbing slowly, hundreds of universities and schools remained occupied across the country. During the Christmas break there were renewed clashes between protesting youth and the police.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the protests express a deep dissatisfaction with the country's political elite. The New Democracy (ND) government led by Karamanlis has virtually no support in the population. The majority of Greeks regard the protests as a justified revolt against a corrupt clique in business and politics, which has lavishly lined its pockets while conducting ever sharper attacks against the population.

For the first time since the elections of 2006, recent opinion polls place opposition leader George Papandreou of the social-democratic Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) ahead of Karamanlis. The leftist coalition SYRIZA has overtaken the Communist Party (KKE) in the polls and is now ranked third.

Under the pressure of the continuing demonstrations, Karamanlis has announced the reorganization of his cabinet. But this attempt to appease public anger by dismissing a few scapegoats is unlikely to rescue the fortunes of his government, which has a razor-thin majority of just one seat in the lower house of parliament. There is also growing opposition to Karamanlis inside his own party.

Against the background of the worldwide economic crisis and the threat of mass redundancies throughout Greek industry, there is growing fear among the ruling elite that the protests by students could come together with strikes by angry workers. In view of this situation the call is growing for a "strong government."

PASOK leader Papandreou, together with the trade unions, the left alliance SYRIZA, and sections of the media, are demanding fresh elections. In mid-December one main Athens newspaper ran the headline: "Position to be filled—government required." Possible alternatives to the current government include a coalition of New Democracy and PASOK, or even a "left government" consisting of PASOK, SYRIZA and the KKE.

In particular, leftist groupings are encouraging the illusion that the voting out of Karamanlis and a change of government could bring improvements for the population at large. Any considered analysis of the Greek political landscape makes clear that this is by no means the case.

PASOK

The catastrophic conditions at schools and universities targeted by the current protests find their origins largely in the period of PASOK rule. PASOK has dominated Greek politics since the end of the military junta

in 1974. It headed the government from 1981 to 1989 and from 1993 to 2004 and exerted a powerful influence on the country's trade unions. Above all, General Confederation of Greek Workers, the GSEE, has a long history of close relations to PASOK.

During the 1980s PASOK put forward pronounced nationalist policies bound up with anti-American and anti-European rhetoric. It carried out a number of limited social reforms, only to junk such a policy a decade later when, in common with other European social-democratic parties, it increasingly adopted neo-liberal policies and implemented a series of welfare cuts at the behest of the European Union. The government led by Konstantin Simitis began a program of radical reforms in 1996 involving the large-scale deregulation and privatisation of entire sectors of the public service. This was largely the political tradition inherited by Karamanlis and carried forward when his party was elected in 2004.

PASOK also undertook a pronounced turn to the right in foreign policy. The party declared its full support for NATO and the European Union. In 1999 the PASOK government backed the US-NATO-led war against Yugoslavia while unreservedly supporting the "anti-terror struggle" of the European Union. These decisions met with growing popular opposition and in 2000 PASOK achieved only a narrow electoral victory over the ND.

When George Papandreou took over the presidency of the party prior to the 2004 elections, PASOK was already so discredited that even a populist election campaign and promises of social reforms were insufficient. Karamanlis and New Democracy won the election.

In the last election campaign in 2007, Papandreou put himself forward as a left alternative to Karamanlis. He promised to fight corruption and free up money to reform the country's run-down pension and health systems—but all to no effect. The Greek population had undergone a series of bitter experiences with PASOK. In its nearly 20 years in power a broad network of nepotism and corruption had developed across the country. Long before Karamanlis came to power, PASOK had given its seal of approval to the criminal property speculators who were responsible for the devastating forest fires last year, and the party had undertaken a series of major cuts to the country's welfare provisions.

Today the internal party struggle in PASOK is only exceeded in intensity by the acute crisis of ND. Following the last election, PASOK leader Papandreou had difficulty retaining his post as chairman. The party has lost any broad level of popular support and threatens to be torn apart by opposing factions. According to recent polls, 86 percent of the Greek population rejects both the conservative and "socialist" parties.

The KKE

The Communist Party is the oldest party in Greek politics. It has reacted

to the student protests with a clear lurch to the right, placing the maintenance of public order at the heart of its policy. It has condemned the protesters as "wilful perpetrators of violence" and warned against "juvenile self-justice."

In the universities, the student federations attached to the KKE have tried to keep the students under control. In the mass demonstrations the KKE has repeatedly sought to organize its own protests in order to divide and break down the opposition front. The KKE is the only opposition party that has rejected the demand for new elections, thereby strengthening the conservative government.

Such a policy is not new for the KKE. In the course of the collapse of the Soviet Union the party initiated an alliance of leftist parties including so-called Euro-communists who had previously broken away from the Communist Party. This alliance, the Coalition of Left and Progressive Forces (1989), won 13 percent of the vote and for a short time entered into a coalition government with ND. Even at that time it had sought to prop up the conservative government despite the fact that the latter was embroiled in corruption.

The KKE maintained a strong orientation to Moscow until the end of the 1980s and following the collapse of the Soviet Union broke apart. After the departure of a number of different factions the party is in the hands of hard-core Stalinists, although still subject to internal conflicts.

The KKE has rapidly lost support in the population, particularly amongst youth. The organisation relies heavily on its party apparatus, which was first built up in cooperation with the former Soviet Union. In the postwar period and based on funding from Moscow the KKE had been able to acquire a small empire of interests, including a printing company, two radio stations, various industries and trading companies, as well as building firms and hotels.

SYRIZA

The leftist coalition SYRIZA has best been able to profit from the present crisis. It has adapted to the protests with radical sounding declarations of support. SYRIZA and its affiliated organisations have taken part in a number of the demonstrations and have called for measures to fight the country's social and political crisis.

However behind its rhetoric SYRIZA puts forward openly reformist policies. The alliance is trying to steer the growing leftist radicalisation of broad layers of the population into channels harmless to the ruling class. In no respect does SYRIZA represent a genuine political alternative to PASOK and the KKE.

The leaders of SYRIZA have clearly qualified their support for the protests in comments to the media and have sought to demonstrate their loyalty to the organs of the state. The party leadership accepted an invitation by Karamanlis for talks aimed at discussing solutions to the latest crisis and the leader of the SYRIZA parliamentary fraction, Alekos Alavanos, has held talks with the leadership of the Greek police. Only recently he demanded a democratic reform of the police force alongside measures to provide more jobs and improve the country's labour laws. This demand for a police reform is directly bound up with a call for the stabilization of state power.

Another SYRIZA leader, Alexis Tsipras, has also made some vague demands for better conditions for youth to Greek President Karolos Papoulias, linking such demands to an appeal to the president to intervene in the present crisis. Like no other figure, however, Papoulias embodies the corrupt system that prevails in the country. In his former function as foreign minister, Papoulias was involved in a series of shady dealings and today enjoys contact with the country's most powerful dynasties. He has

the support of both PASOK and the ND.

Alavanos and Tsipras are typical figures with regard to the social and political orientation of SYRIZA. Alavanos is an economist and originates from the hard-core Stalinist Greek Communist Party. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Alavanos joined the organization Synaspismos, which is part of the current SYRIZA alliance. He comes from the country's upper class and owns numerous properties on the island of Tenos.

After Alavanos stepped down as party chairman he was replaced by Fotis Kouvelis, who began his political career in the resistance against the military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974, and the 33-year-old Tsipras.

Kouvelis is a former long-time leader of a faction that emerged from a split in the KKE. He was then secretary-general of its successor organisation, the EAR, which merged at a later date into Synaspismos. Kouvelis has been a member of parliament almost continuously since 1989, and in 1989 even briefly held the post of justice minister. Politically he stands for bringing together the KKE and PASOK in a broad leftist coalition on a parliamentary and government level.

Kouvelis was replaced as head of Synaspismos by the chairman of its youth movement, Tsipras, who opposed such a course. Tsipras has so far declared his preference for an "extra-parliamentary movement." In a recent mayoral election in Athens he was able to win over 10 percent of the vote.

Tsipras's election to the post of Synaspismos chairman reflects a fear that the SYRIZA alliance could quickly discredit itself by making excessively public overtures to the Greek social-democrats. However, as the crisis intensifies a number of the component parties of SYRIZA have made clear that they are intent on cooperation with the country's main political parties.

In any event, any differences are of a purely tactical nature. For some time there has been close cooperation between PASOK and the radical left on a local level.

Fundamentally, the policy of SYRIZA strongly resembles the reformist policy of PASOK in the 1980s—calling for a halt to privatisations, an increase in public expenditure and development of the social welfare net, combined with a foreign policy based on opposition to the US and the European Union.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, the press spokesman of SYRIZA, Andreas Karitzis, openly acknowledged: "Social reforms bring society in the right direction ... through nationalisations we are able to limit the power of the big concerns." In this respect, Karitzis pointed to the bourgeois nationalist regime of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela as a role model for Greece.

Against this backdrop, the party is holding its options open for a government collaboration with PASOK: "If one sits in government during such a development it can be either favourable or not," Karitzis explained.

These comments makes clear that none of the so-called "leftist" organisations have any progressive alternative to offer the Greek population in the current crisis. Indeed these parties are doing all they can to defend the existing order.



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