

Greek protest movement requires a socialist perspective

PASOK and SYRIZA: no alternative to the right-wing government

European sections ICFI
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This following statement will be distributed to the mass demonstrations of students and youth taking place in Athens on Friday, January 9.

During the last month, there has been a series of mass protests, strikes and clashes with the police in Athens and other Greek cities. The conservative New Democracy (ND) government led by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis has come under increasing pressure, but the recent changes to his cabinet are entirely cosmetic and will do nothing to change its political course.

The two largest opposition parties, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), are calling for new elections to resolve the current crisis, but neither organisation represents any real alternative to the New Democracy government. Following many years in government, during which PASOK implemented a string of policies aimed against the Greek population, the party suffered devastating defeats in the elections held in 2004 and 2007. Although the leader of the SYRIZA parliamentary group, Alekos Alavanos, has recently ruled out any alliance with PASOK, nobody should take his words seriously. A number of alliances between PASOK and SYRIZA already exist on a local level.

It is above all the catastrophic conditions at Greek schools and universities, and the lack of any future prospects, that have led increasing numbers of students and youth to take to the streets in protest. State institutions are completely run down, and the only form of adequate education takes place at expensive private schools. At the conclusion of their studies, most youth are condemned to either unemployment or poorly paid jobs. The youth jobless rate stands at more than 21 percent.

Successive governments have claimed there is no money available for the educational and social systems, while at the same time a tiny minority has been able to accumulate fantastic wealth. This layer can rely on the support of a corrupt political elite, which in the course of a series of political scandals during past decades has made clear its contempt for the broad masses of the population.

The intervention of broad layers of the population against this development is to be welcomed. But protest, even in its most radical forms, remains limited to reformist illusions. It seeks to put pressure

on the ruling elite in the hope they will change their policies. The current crisis of capitalism, however, rules out any possibility of reforms.

All over Europe and across the world the younger generation is confronted with a society in which the ruling elites have filled their pockets at the expense of the population, plundered state funds, destroyed educational and social systems, and defended their privileges with the combined aid of a corrupt state and party bureaucracy and units of armed police.

The social and political crisis in Greece and Europe is an expression of a profound crisis of the entire capitalist system. The current financial crisis has led to the rekindling of the fundamental contradictions of capitalism. Across the globe, governments are increasingly reacting to the crisis with a combination of domestic repression and a new wave of militarist aggression.

This is the significance of the murderous assault by the Israeli military on the defenceless people of Gaza. Greece, with its weak industrial base and an economy that is extremely susceptible to international crises, has already been especially hard hit. Thousands will lose their jobs in the coming months, and Karamanlis has already announced that he will respond to the economic difficulties with further “reforms”—i.e., further social attacks on the population.

The struggle against incessant welfare cuts requires a socialist perspective. The working class must unite internationally in the struggle for a socialist society that places social requirements and progress over the profit interests of a tiny elite.

In this respect, the Greek population confronts not only a corrupt right-wing government. The so-called “left” parties and trade unions also defend the bourgeois order and the profit system.

The appalling conditions prevailing at many schools and universities are largely a result of policies and cuts implemented by PASOK. The party has dominated Greek politics since the overthrow of the military junta in 1974 and headed most Greek governments up to 2004. In the 1980s, the party implemented a number of limited social reforms wrapped up in anti-European and anti-American rhetoric. But since then, and in common with social democratic parties across Europe, it has conducted a host of welfare cuts. Beginning with the PASOK

government of Konstantin Simitis in 1996, the party set in motion a process of deregulation and privatisation of broad areas of public service. This policy was essentially adopted and intensified by Karamanlis when he took power in 2004.

At the same time, PASOK enjoys close links to the country's trade unions—in particular, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE). Apart from ritual protest demonstrations and strikes, the GSEE did nothing to oppose the privatisations begun in the 1990. In close cooperation with PASOK and business associations, the unions have implemented wage cuts and attacks on working conditions. The recent occupation of the GSEE headquarters in Athens made clear the extent to which this organisation is increasingly seen as an obstacle to progress by workers and youth.

The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) has reacted to the student protests with a further lurch to the right. Following a series of violent clashes between protesters and state forces, the KKE turned on those protesting, condemning them as “violent criminals run amok.” The party's only concern is to prevent any expansion of the protests that escapes the control of the trade union and social democratic bureaucratic apparatuses. It should be noted that the KKE is the only opposition party that has spoken out against new elections.

The KKE was created as a revolutionary party in 1918 in the wake of the Russian Revolution. But by the end of the 1920s, it was already completely under control of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow. In the 1940s, the KKE developed its own secret police, the OPLA, which up to the end of the civil war abducted and murdered hundreds of Trotskyists who had opposed Stalin's reactionary policies.

The KKE implemented the treacherous policy of Stalin, who at the end of the war had already awarded Greece to the Western powers. In 1949, the KKE suppressed the civil war in Greece, allowing monarchist and extreme rightist forces to regain influence in the country. This policy culminated with the Colonel's Coup of 1967, which brought to power a brutal, pro-Western military government led by General Georgios Papadopoulos, which tortured and killed thousands of leftists, trade unionists and communists.

The readiness of the KKE to support a right-wing government today was made clear in 1989 when the organisation participated in an alliance of the left parties that briefly joined a coalition with New Democracy.

The Coalition of the Radical Left, SYRIZA, also provides no alternative to the discredited old workers' organisations. The biggest grouping inside SYRIZA is Synaspismos, which has its roots in a split from the KKE. SYRIZA has declared its support for the latest demonstrations and called for measures to deal with the social and political crisis. But behind its radical rhetoric, Synaspismos, in an alliance with Greens, Maoists and other radicals, offers merely a warmed-over version of reformist protest politics. The alliance is seeking to steer the rapid movement to the left by broad layers of the population into channels harmless to the ruling class.

The alliance's demands, including a stop to privatisations, increased public expenditure, and superficial reforms of the social and educational systems, could all be drawn from the reformist

programme of PASOK in the 1980s. However, the rightward drift of PASOK has already made clear that the globalisation of production has stripped away the basis for any progressive reforms.

The European working class has already undergone a series of painful experiences with parties such as SYRIZA. In Italy, it was the collaboration of the organisation Communist Refoundation that helped lever Silvio Berlusconi back into power. In Germany, the Left Party, which is allied to Synaspismos in the European Left, has carried out a number of welfare cuts in its role as coalition partner in the Berlin Senate. Today, Berlin leads the German Republic in unemployment and poverty levels.

Under these conditions, anarchist ideas have won a certain influence among students. The frustration and anger of many students over the bankrupt establishment parties is entirely justified. But at the same time, in the absence of a clear political perspective, the movement will be isolated and demoralised. This in turn creates a climate that can be exploited by the state and used to organise provocations against the protests. There have been a number of reports to indicate that agents of the Greek state were implicated in the acts of violence carried out in the course of earlier demonstrations. Now, the shooting of a young policeman at the start of this week is being used to demonise the protests and the “radical left,” although the exact circumstances surrounding the shooting and who was responsible for it still remain unclear.

The only way forward for students and youth is a deliberate turn to workers in Greece and throughout Europe on the basis of an international socialist programme, which draws political lessons from the rich arsenal of the historical experiences of the international working class.

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