

Greece: “Leftist” SYRIZA alliance defends police months after suppression of mass demonstrations

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A news agency in Athens recently reported that Alekos Alavanos, chairman of the parliamentary fraction of the ostensibly left-wing SYRIZA alliance, has expressed his full support for the Greek police.

Following a meeting with functionaries of the POASY police trade union held on July 3 in SYRIZA’s parliament office, Alavanos explained that Greece’s police force was defending the rights and freedoms of the population. Furthermore, he said, the police were safeguarding the democratic development of the country by preventing terrorist activities, aimed at raising tensions and destabilising political relations.

In his view, however, it was unacceptable that the police were too often given the task of solving problems arising from the government’s misguided policies. Alavanos announced that he was going to discuss some “problems related specifically to the police” in a talk, scheduled with Interior Minister Prokopis Pavlopoulos. He promised to do all he could to ensure the police are better equipped and that their problems were taken more seriously.

Interior Minister Pavlopoulos is a long-standing leading member of the conservative governing Nea Dimokratia party (ND), who offered to step down from his post at the end of last year, when a 15 year-old school pupil was shot by the police. The death of the young boy was the stimulus for weeks of protest on the part of pupils and students, leading to confrontations not seen in Greece since the end of the military dictatorship.

Alavanos’s praise for the police is an affront to the many thousands of young people and workers, who witnessed firsthand the brutality of the Greek police and their special forces. SYRIZA is currently making a sharp move to the right of the political spectrum. Preparing for closer cooperation with the social democratic PASOK

party, it declares its unreserved acceptance of the bourgeois order and the state.

This swing to the right is dramatically raising tensions within SYRIZA itself.

During the European Union election campaign, Alavanos stood openly for close cooperation with PASOK, which is widely discredited among the Greek populace owing to its corrupt, neo-liberal policies. But, because the public abhors even more the conservative government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, PASOK was able to reverse the European trend and modestly improve its standing.

On the other hand, SYRIZA’s election results were exceptionally bad. Instead of the 10 to 12 percent, forecast by surveys a few months earlier, SYRIZA polled a mere 4.7 percent. This is not much more than its strongest alliance member, Synaspismos, reached by itself for years previously.

The main reason for the dismal result in the European election was doubtlessly SYRIZA’s opportunist antics during the youth demonstrations last winter. Although the party officially supported the protests, it did everything it could to restrict and disperse them. This earned SYRIZA a dramatic loss of support on the part of young voters.

Alavanos exploited the unfavourable election result to speed up his move to the right. He said the result was the “consequence of his own mistakes”. The policies, pursued by his party in recent years, had distanced it from the people. It was necessary to adopt a new course towards accommodation with the PASOK party.

When a majority of the party executive objected, Alavanos issued an ultimatum and stopped working for the party. At the same time, he announced his intention of resigning from parliament. Fearing further loss of political influence, SYRIZA functionaries persuaded him to

reverse his decision and stay. No one dared to seriously challenge the prosperous economics expert who owns extensive estates on the island of Tenos.

Alavanos henceforth styled himself as the “innovator” of the party and continued to pursue his course towards cooperation with PASOK in order to oust the crisis-ridden Karamanlis government. Opposing Alavanos is the party’s leader, Aleksis Tsipras, who heads its “radical” wing. Tsipras has always expressly ruled out an alliance with PASOK and, in doing so, is backed by the majority of the party. Instead, Tsipras advocates a broad alliance of “anti-capitalist” forces. He wants to make the party the “third pole of the left”, together with PASOK and the Stalinist Communist Party (KKE).

There are no fundamental political differences behind this conflict. Alavanos worked with Tsipras for years and helped advance his career. Moreover, there is a long record of close cooperation between PASOK and the so-called radical left at the municipal level.

Both Alavanos and Tsipras epitomise the middle class social and political orientation of SYRIZA. Alavanos, the economist, comes from the arch-Stalinist milieu of the Communist Party. After the collapse of the Soviet Union deeply shook the Greek Stalinists, Alavanos changed camp and became a founding member of the Synaspismos Alliance—a coalition of “left” and ecological movements—which is part of the SYRIZA alliance. Alavanos enjoys close relations with the country’s elite, to which he belongs.

The considerably younger Aleksis Tsipras was cultivated by Alavanos precisely to prevent SYRIZA from exhausting itself politically by associating itself too quickly with the discredited social democrats. Under his leadership, SYRIZA’s line began to echo the reformist policies of PASOK in the 1980s, including restraining privatisations, increasing public spending and expanding the welfare state.

The diffuseness of SYRIZA’s programme reflects the heterogeneity of the middle class groups comprising it. These groups represent virtually the whole spectrum of ex-radical politics, from former Stalinists and Maoists, to feminists and ecological activists. SYRIZA was deliberately established to divert the population’s growing anger about PASOK’s turn to the right and contain it within limits acceptable to the ruling elite.

However, the bitter disharmony within SYRIZA shows that this is becoming more and more difficult to achieve in times of mounting social crisis.

The consequences of the economic crisis in Greece are

obvious everywhere. The tourism industry, which constitutes almost 20 percent of the gross domestic product and employs over 800,000 people, will decline by about 12 percent this year. Numerous hotels have already gone bankrupt and more will follow.

In addition, Greek merchant shipping, another traditionally strong sector of the economy, is beginning to feel the effects of the downturn. Greek ship owners control more than a fifth of global goods traffic by ship and thus possess the world’s biggest merchant fleet. Until recently, high oil prices led to record profits. Now the cost of freightage is often greater than the profit it yields, and experts estimate that every fifth order, received by the ship owners, will be cancelled in the course of the year.

The political and corporate establishment is reacting to the crisis by launching savage attacks on workers. Two weeks ago, railwaymen went on strike against the government’s proposed austerity measures and plans for privatisation. A great number of international train services had to be cancelled.

A strike by air traffic controllers was only prevented by a ruling from an Athens court, prohibiting the strike in the school holiday period. The controllers’ struggle is directed against cost-cutting measures and intolerable working conditions.

Herein lies the deeper reason for the conflicts within the middle class left groupings. Alavanos and Tsipras know very well that further demonstrations and major strikes can quickly develop under these conditions. Their dispute turns on the question of how social opposition can be kept under control, so as to avoid any threat to the bourgeois order.



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