

Greece: The pseudo-left and the trade unions

Ulrich Rippert
20 March 2010

Greece is currently a focal point of the international economic and political crisis. It is where the European and international financial elite is testing its methods for imposing unprecedented attacks on the working class not only in Greece, but in every country.

Workers and youth in Greece have begun to fight back against austerity measures aimed at reversing the social gains won over decades of struggle and drastically lowering working class living standards. This is forcing all political tendencies to reveal the social forces which they objectively represent.

The events in Greece cast a sharp light on political issues that have a significance far beyond Athens and Thesaloniki. In particular, the actions and policies of the petty-bourgeois political groupings that present themselves as “left” reveal their critical role in helping to block an independent movement of the working class and thereby preserving the bourgeois order.

What characterizes the current political situation in Greece?

The social democratic PASOK government is acting on behalf of international finance capital by imposing draconian cuts to make the working population pay for the bankruptcy of the state, resulting from its bailout of the banks, and the overall crisis of the capitalist system.

PASOK, in turn, relies on the trade unions, with which it has a long association, to divide, dissipate and exhaust the resistance of the workers by restricting it to fruitless protests. While union leaders criticize the cuts at protest rallies, they back the government and devote their efforts to stabilizing the capitalist system. This means, in practice, creating the conditions for PASOK to impose the cuts demanded by the banks.

Under conditions where the unions’ treachery is ever more apparent and they face increasing criticism from workers, the union bureaucracy, in its turn, relies on the pseudo-left groups. Their role is to prevent a rebellion

by workers against the organizational and political straitjacket of the union apparatus.

Political organizations like SYRIZA, which calls itself a “Coalition of the Radical Left,” and Antarsya, which was established last spring as the “Cooperation of the Anti-Capitalist Left for the Revolution,” insist that no struggle against the austerity measures is possible or legitimate unless it is headed by the unions.

They ignore the fact that the leaderships of the two main union federations, GSEE in the private sector and ADEDY in the public sector, are largely comprised of PASOK members, and that both organizations are allied to the very party that is carrying out the attacks on the working class.

The central demand of SYRIZA and Antarsya is for the “unity of the left” in support of trade union action by GSEE and ADEDY. This programme of “unity” behind the unions is a betrayal of the interests of the working class. Its purpose is to uphold the authority of right-wing organizations that are working for the defeat of the workers.

Real unity of the working class can be established only on the basis of a rebellion against the unions and the establishment of new, democratic organs of struggle based on a socialist perspective—the fight to mobilize the working population to bring down the PASOK government and replace it with a workers’ government.

There is nothing accidental about the orientation of these fake “lefts.” It does not arise from the impulses of individual leaders. The line-up of petty-bourgeois ex-left organizations with the trade union apparatuses is a universal political phenomenon. It can be seen on every continent and in every country—the ex-radicals in the US, the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, the Left Party in Germany, the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, etc., etc.

Everywhere, these groups argue that the unions, which have for decades openly colluded with the

employers and their respective governments, and, as a result of their treachery, lost most of their members, are the true and legitimate representatives of the working class.

This is not the result of a political misunderstanding. The identification of the ex-lefts with the trade union bureaucracy and their personal ascent into the highest echelons of the union apparatus represent an important mechanism for the integration of these forces into the framework of bourgeois politics.

They justify support for the social democratic parties by arguing that they have close links with the unions. Conversely, if they promote the establishment of new parties, they measure success by whether they have won the support of an important section of the trade union bureaucracy.

Many of these forces were deeply integrated into the welfare state, which in past decades enabled an entire layer around the trade union bureaucracy to enjoy a thoroughly pleasant and privileged life. They regarded the welfare state as a force for order, and were viscerally hostile towards any independent movement of the working class.

Today, they feel threatened by the social and political implications of the economic crisis—above all, the intensification of the class struggle—and cling to the trade unions all the more adamantly. In essence, these political groupings are a component of petty-bourgeois layers which the crisis is pushing to the right, and which see the unions as a bulwark against social revolution.

That is what underlies the rapid rightward movement of organizations such as SYRIZA and Antarsya in Greece and their counterparts in other countries.

It is no coincidence that the acting chair of the German Left Party and leader of the European Left in the EU Parliament, Lothar Bisky, a few days before a one-day general strike in Greece said: “The general population has to participate in the debt reduction, but in moderation.”

That leaves nothing to the imagination. At the conference of SYRIZA in Athens at the end of February, Bisky spoke for both organizations when he emphasized their close cooperation.

Bisky confirms what the International Committee of the Fourth International said in its statement of March 17 on the European debt crisis—a successful struggle

against austerity measures in Greece and in every country requires a radical break with the unions and their defenders among the ex-lefts. (See: The Greek debt crisis signals a new stage in class conflict”)

Ulrich Rippert



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact