SYRIZA rally: the reactionary politics of the middle class “left” in Greece

Alex Lantier, John Vassilopoulos in Athens
17 May 2010

WSWS reporters in Athens attended the May 14 rally of SYRIZA (the Coalition of the Radical Left), called in response to the massive social cuts being carried out by Prime Minister George Papandreou.

Middle class parties like SYRIZA and the Greek Communist Party (KKE) pose as left critics of Papandreou’s policy, while working to legitimize his policies in practice. A definite division of labor emerges: Papandreou’s social democratic PASOK party negotiates cuts with the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and provides the votes for them in parliament. For its part, SYRIZA disorients and demoralizes working class opposition. Indeed, one of SYRIZA’s leading factions, the Renewal Wing, advocates forming an open political coalition with PASOK.

In this context, the SYRIZA rally’s predominant feature was the absence of any call for bringing down the Papandreou government, despite its wildly unpopular and anti-social policies. Instead, the main speakers—SYRIZA parliamentary delegation leader Alexis Tspiras and former member of parliament Manolis Glezos—demanded looser monetary policy and promoted Greek chauvinism.

In a hypocritical and perfunctory nod to “internationalism,” the rally began with speeches from foreign visitors. The first speaker was *Parti communiste français* (French Communist Party, PCF) deputy Jean-Pierre Brard, who sits on the French National Assembly’s financial commission. The PCF is a political adjunct of the social democratic *Parti Socialiste* (Socialist Party, PS), which is preparing plans for social cuts modeled on those of Papandreou, should it return to power. Joe Higgins, from Ireland’s Socialist Party, also spoke. Despite his ritualistic invocations of international solidarity, his party supported last year’s chauvinist “British jobs for British workers” campaign mounted by British unions.

Tsipras began his speech by praising the “unity of the movement” against Papandreou’s cuts and hypothesizing that it might spread throughout Southern Europe. Such comments aim to hide the total disunity and impotence of the current trade union protests in Southern Europe, while appealing to the feeling of united opposition that workers instinctively feel in the face of the cuts.

There has been no serious attempt by SYRIZA or any other party in Greece to organize international strike action by working people in Europe. Within Greece, strike activity is largely limited to one-day national strikes roughly every month, controlled by the PASOK-led GSEE and ADEDY trade unions. Further strikes in individual industrial sectors have been isolated by the unions.

While these strikes give the ruling class a useful test of the degree of anger and opposition among the workers, they pose no threat to Papandreou’s austerity program. Instead, the working class is denied any real opportunity to measure its strength and the growing opposition to Papandreou.

Tsipras criticized Papandreou for lying about the state of Greece’s finances during the election campaign, when he promised to increase social spending. This raises more questions than it answers, however. If it was widely known inside the political establishment that Greece’s finances were worse than was claimed, why did Tsipras call Papandreou to congratulate him upon his election last October?

Tsipras then attacked leaders of the Greek employers’ federation (SEV) for pushing for cuts and restrictions on workers’ rights. He complained that business leaders try to “create a climate in which they

© World Socialist Web Site

devalue the political class and they even demand constitutional reforms, so they can do their job better without the inconvenient reactions from the struggles in society." What Tsipras failed to add was that the Greek population is as angry with politicians as it is with the bankers, and does not see SYRIZA's leaders as significantly different from the rest of them.

The "alternative" Tsipras then proposed was not a new policy for the working class, but rather a proposal for a change in banking policy. He said Greece should "get direct lending from the ECB [European Central Bank] … restructuring the terms, and the term for paying off the debt, the interest rate and maybe with a writing off of some of the debt."

This proposal is not an attempt to mobilize working people or to explain the political implications of the threat of mass impoverishment that Papandreou holds over their heads. SYRIZA's principal policy proposal aims primarily to advise banks and bourgeois politicians on how to lessen the threat of working class opposition.

Tsipras closed with deceitful calls for "social control of the banks." In fact, his policy is the opposite of a policy where workers confiscate major investors' accounts to meet social needs—that is, the struggle for socialism and workers' control of industry. Leaving undisturbed the mega-fortunes built up in Greece and internationally, it simply aims to redistribute the burden of funding the financial aristocracy towards other countries.

Glezos, a resistance fighter during World War II in the Greek Communist Party, called for individual Greeks to loan money to the government at low interest rates, to help Athens repay its debts—a reactionary proposal that amounts at most to partially bailing out the banks with whatever savings Greek workers still have.

He then launched into a nationalist attack on Germany, on the grounds that German Chancellor Angela Merkel should have agreed more quickly to the unpopular EU-IMF bailout of Greece. He said that during World War II, Germany "took all the wealth that existed in Greece, all foodstuffs, and took it to Germany in order for the German people to survive. Not even on this issue did [Merkel] show the least bit of gratitude, she should not talk."

Glezos then proposed to loot the German economy, to pay back Greece's creditors among the major banks. He called for "struggle so that Germany pays back everything that it owes Greece: debts to the public purse, reparations, forced loans, archeological treasures and compensations to victims. These reparations, of which only half has been estimated, come to €160 billion without interest in today's money. You understand then what Germany owes to Greece."

He closed with a cynical appeal for party unity inside SYRIZA: "If we each think we have the truth, we will never get anywhere." When factions of SYRIZA openly call for working with Papandreou, this amounts to a promise that SYRIZA will continue its two-faced support for the government and social austerity.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site