

Social democrats win Greek regional elections amid mass abstention

Robert Stevens

17 November 2010

The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government of Prime Minister George Papandreou won the Greek regional elections in the second and final round of voting on Sunday. The first round of voting, one week earlier, had resulted in only 2 of the 13 regional seats being won outright, prompting the second run-off.

In the second round, PASOK won eight of the country's 13 regions. Candidates backed by the party also took 73 of the country's 325 municipalities being contested. The other five regions were won by candidates backed by the conservative opposition party, New Democracy (ND).

As with the first round of voting, the abstention rate among voters reached a new record. In the first round, the abstention tally stood at a very high 39.01 percent, with a further 5.49 percent spoiling their ballot paper. This increased markedly in the second round, with 53.23 percent of the electorate not voting. A further 11.67 percent of people produced a blank/spoiled ballot paper.

This means that nearly two in three Greek voters did not vote for a candidate in the second round.

This mass abstention is a particularly clear sign of growing discontent with “official” politics, as it is illegal not to vote in Greece. Such levels of abstention reveal a pronounced level of disgust with both PASOK and ND, who are equally reviled and viewed as proponents of austerity and social misery.

In what were considered upsets, the regional government changed hands in close contests in Greece's three largest cities—Athens, Thessaloniki and Piraeus. In Athens the PASOK-backed candidate and former Greek Ombudsman George Kaminis won the seat, with 51.94 percent against incumbent mayor Nikitas Kaklamanis. In Thessaloniki, PASOK-backed Yiannis Boutaris won with 50.2 percent over Costas Gioulekas, backed by ND. In Piraeus, ND-backed Vassilis Michaloliakos won the mayoral seat by 51.76 percent against PASOK-backed opponent Yiannis Michas.

As well as revealing the hostility of millions of people to the austerity programmes of the main bourgeois parties, the election also reveals the bankruptcy of the Greek middle-class, ex-left formations.

In the past year, Papandreou has unleashed an unprecedented programme of draconian cuts against the working class and sections of the middle class. At the behest of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank, it has imposed spending cuts of billions of euros. According

to reports, Greek workers have on average taken a 30 percent wage cut.

The slashing of jobs, wages, pensions and conditions of millions of people has provoked mass resistance, expressed in the numerous strikes and protests held throughout the country.

This scenario would normally result in an uplift of the fortunes of organisations declaring themselves to be of the “left”. However, the election results have shown that these forces, including the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE), SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) and ANTARSYA (Anticapitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow), can at best claim only marginal increases in their support.

The KKE increased its vote to 592,977, about 80,000 votes more than its 2009 total. The KKE said that it had 41 regional councillors elected and over 500 municipal councillors. This represented an increase of just 10 percent over its 2009 vote. As a ratio of the total electorate, who are legally obliged to vote, however, is it less than a 1 percent increase.

The Stalinists' vote demonstrates they are only able to win support among the forces they can mobilise in their trade union body, PAME.

Ultimately, the Stalinists can only be viewed as an alternative “left” formation due to the role played by SYRIZA and ANTARSYA.

SYRIZA was formed in 2004 when Synaspismos, its largest component comprised mainly of “Euro-Communist” Stalinists from the KKE, united with several smaller groups. SYRIZA polled 4.5 percent in the election, but its numerical vote actually fell by 73,000 in total.

The elections mark a qualitative stage in the break-up and fragmentation of SYRIZA into various right-wing strands. In July, SYRIZA suffered a split, in which it lost four legislators of its 11-member parliamentary group. These four—Fotis Kouvelis, Nikos Tsoukalis, Thanasis Leventis and Grigoris Psarianos—were part of the Renewal Wing (RW) of the coalition and announced that they would sit as independents in parliament. Leventis also resigned from his post as deputy parliamentary speaker.

As the political character of the PASOK government as a tool of capital had become clear, RW became increasingly vocal in its demands that SYRIZA more openly support austerity. RW leader Kouvelis said: “We want a left that does not feel it is legitimate to defend all workers' established rights”.

The faction went on to form the Democratic Left and has since

worked openly with PASOK in support of its anti-working class agenda, including demanding that truck drivers end their strike in July. This support has now extended to assisting PASOK in the regional elections. Giorgos Kaminis, who won the mayoral seat in Athens, was supported by both PASOK and the Democratic Left. Other candidates supported by the Democratic Left won seats in 35 municipalities in the election.

In September former SYRIZA leader Alekos Alavanos announced his intention to run a competing campaign. In the election he stood at the head as part of a nationalist, anti-foreigner “Free Attica” slate. He received just 2.2 percent of the vote. In Attica he was opposed by a founding member of PASOK, Alexis Mitropoulos, who was being supported by Synaspismos, again on an overt nationalist platform. Mitropoulos also received a small vote of 6.2 percent.

ANTARSYA contains various groups, including split-offs from the KKE and other pseudo-left and ecological tendencies that claim to offer a revolutionary alternative to SYRIZA. The Organisation of Communist Internationalists of Greece-Spartakos (the Greek section of the Pabloite United Secretariat) is part of ANTARSYA, as are the Socialist Workers Party (SEK), sympathetic to the British Socialist Workers Party. ANTARSYA polled 25,000 votes in 2009 and increased this to 95,000 votes in this election—2 percent of the national vote.

In reality, both PASOK and the KKE rely on the various components of SYRIZA and ANTARSYA to shield them from criticism from the left. Though they exist as separate organisations, SYRIZA and ANTARSYA have no principled differences. Fundamentally, they are all united by a refusal to mount any political struggle against the government and their insistence that the union bureaucracy must lead the opposition to austerity and cuts—even as they lead workers into a dead end of repeated one-day protests.

Their role as props of bourgeois rule has been exposed in their own response to the elections. Andreas Payiatsos, of the Xekinima group, which is part of SYRIZA, gave an interview, published November 12, describing the crisis facing that party. Xekinima is the Greek organisation of the Committee for a Workers International (CWI), which is politically led by the Socialist Party group in Britain.

Payiatsos painted a devastating portrait of the Greek “left”, including his own tendency. He noted, “The problem is that the parties of the Left did not grow and did not provide a way out for the desperate and angry Greek masses. The forces of the Left remained fundamentally stagnant.”

“The crisis inside SYRIZA is deep and will continue,” he added.

Payiatsos did not say that SYRIZA was “divided” because its component parts are competing over how best to cover for PASOK as both parties lurch to the right.

Instead, he stated proudly, “The majority of the members of the Central Secretariat of SYRIZA, about 10, including two of the SYRIZA MPs, distanced themselves from both warring factions, by trying to develop a ‘third pole’ inside SYRIZA”.

Payiatsos said this was “based on principles and not sectarian ambitions, and on a programme to the left of the existing SYRIZA programme”.

In the tortured language of Xekinima, this demand for an end to “sectarian” politics translates into a call for various SYRIZA factions to make unprincipled alliances or even to join forces with the KKE. In March, Payiatsos insisted, “One of the key tasks for socialists in Greece is to fight against the splitting tactics of sections of the left, and campaign for a ‘united front’ approach, especially of the KKE and SYRIZA”.

In an article by Payiatsos and a British member of the CWI published in September, they openly said of the SYRIZA lists in the forthcoming regional elections that most of them were “split or a result of rotten deals between the Maoists and the SYN leadership”. Despite these “rotten” alliances, they concluded that they would give “critical support not only to Syriza, but also to the KKE and, in some cases, to candidates of the far left”.

The reality is that Xekinima makes no serious criticisms of, or poses any threat to the Stalinists and the trade union bureaucracy who have been the essential forces in allowing the PASOK government to remain in office.

In his latest comments, Payiatsos states that “the central leadership of the Greek trade union movement has decided to wind up the movement against the PASOK government’s deep austerity cuts”.

After describing this as an “open betrayal”, which has led to the general secretary of the General Confederation of Unions (GSEE) becoming a “hated figure”, he continues: “However, even he has been forced, under the pressure from below, to call for another general strike on December 15.”

Such claims aim primarily to promote illusions that the GSEE, a body whose leadership is controlled by PASOK officials, can be pressured into effectively opposing PASOK’s social cuts.

Despite mouthing the occasional “left” sounding phrase, Xekinima and the ex-left fraternity exist only to provide an essential political cover for the union bureaucracy, the KKE and, through them, PASOK. Among such groups, “unity” and opposition to “sectarianism” have a very specific meaning. It means unity in opposition to the development of the political independence of the working class and the building of a revolutionary, socialist movement committed to the bringing down of the PASOK regime and its replacement by a workers government.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact