

SYRIZA leader Tsipras in Berlin

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When Alexis Tsipras spoke in Berlin on Tuesday, he wanted to appear as statesmanlike as possible. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel refused to grant the chair of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) an audience, let alone a joint appearance, thanks to the support of the Left Party faction in the Bundestag (German parliament), Tsipras was able to use the official Federal Press Conference Facility as a stage.

On Monday in Paris, Tsipras had spoken about Merkel attacking Greek sovereignty, and stated that a struggle between capital and labour was unfolding in Europe. In Berlin, however, he chose to employ very diplomatic language. The central demand of his election campaign—a withdrawal of all previous cuts in social spending—was not mentioned once at the press conference.

This demand had helped SYRIZA more than quadruple its vote in the Greek elections on May 6 to 17 percent. It became the second-largest party in parliament. According to current polls, the organisation could emerge as the strongest party in the June 17 elections, potentially making Tsipras the next prime minister.

At the press conference in Berlin, Tsipras seemed to have this office in his sights. Diplomatically, he said: “We have appealed to all sides of the political spectrum and do not want to blackmail anyone.” With the election of Socialist Party candidate Francois Hollande in France and the end of the common policy of his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany’s Merkel, he hoped that those in power had realized their mistakes and that a fair and viable solution would be found.

Repeatedly he stressed that his party was in no way dismissive or even hostile to the EU institutions, and Greece under his rule would not leave the EU. The June 17 election, said Tsipras, would not mean the withdrawal of his country from the EU and the euro, but on the contrary, offers a new chance to save the common currency.

Tsipras spoke as a defender of capitalist order and its international institutions. “We are proposing a way to save the euro,” he said. “Our possible election victory

offers the prospect of stabilizing Europe, not causing more instability as feared.”

Referring to Saturday’s meeting of the group of eight leading economies at Camp David Tsipras added: “Issues the left had formulated a long time ago are now being discussed at the level of the G8, such as euro bonds and direct loans from the European Central Bank. The fact that the G8 is talking about it is a big victory for the people of Europe.”

This vehement defence of the EU is remarkable because SYRIZA’s electoral success was undoubtedly based on widespread opposition to the EU’s austerity measures. In Berlin, together with the chair of the Left Party, Klaus Ernst, and Left Party parliamentary leader Gregor Gysi, Tsipras presented a “six-point programme” for the stabilisation of the European institutions and civil order.

The first point relates to the loan agreement—the Memorandum—between the Greek state and the so-called Troika of the European Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB). The memorandum has dictated the fierce attacks and social cuts which have driven Greece to the brink of the abyss to in recent years.

At the press conference, Tsipras described the memorandum as “completely inefficient,” and its consequences as “catastrophic.” The country was now in a recession for the fifth year in a row, he said. German taxpayers were throwing their money into a bottomless pit, which in reality was only financing the banks.

However, the six-point programme does not call for the withdrawal of all these cuts, but merely that there be no “further social cuts and privatizations.” The country’s debts will not be repudiated, but will be recognized and re-negotiated.

SYRIZA’s economic spokesman, Prof. Ioannis Melios, who had travelled to Berlin with Tsipras, explained the objectives of such negotiations in answer to a question by the WSW. His party wants a debt “haircut” of 50 percent of the credits held by other states or institutions and a deferral of interest payments for three years. Such a

debt haircut would be lower than the one that was negotiated by the outgoing government with the private creditors a few months ago.

The second point refers to a demand made vigorously for months by the various “left” parties in Europe and particularly the Left Party in Germany: direct lending by the ECB or other public banks to the countries in the euro zone. As a first step in this direction, the Left Party and SYRIZA propose the issuing of euro bonds, in other words common state bonds of all euro countries.

This places the two parties on the side of the governments in France and Italy, who have wanted to carry out this policy, long opposed by the German government. There would be nothing progressive in such a policy for workers in Europe, merely serving to extend the social attacks onto all European countries.

The thrust of this demand was also evident when a reporter for the *WSWS* at the press conference confronted Tsipras with his statement that Merkel had to base her crisis programme more on that of President Obama. Obama has provided the US banks with trillions of dollars from the treasury, while simultaneously pushing through cuts in social programmes and wages.

Tsipras vigorously defended his position in his reply. Economic reforms and measures to stimulate the economy were necessary, he said. Otherwise, social upheavals like those in the 1930s were threatened. In this regard, he compared the anti-worker policies of the Obama administration with the policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who heavily taxed the wealthy to fund social and employment programmes.

Tsipras’ programme articulates the interests not of the workers, but of a section of the Greek and European bourgeoisie, for whom German dominance on the continent is a thorn in the side, and who have no interest in the utter bankruptcy of the Greek economy.

For this reason, he is far more sympathetic to the EU institutions, which have been used for decades to attack the rights of workers, and does not want to abolish them, but spreads the illusion they can be reformed.

Asked by the *WSWS*, what he would do following a possible election victory, if the EU and the government in Berlin were not willing to compromise, Tsipras replied evasively. Even greater electoral success for SYRIZA would be an expression of opposition by the Greek people to the austerity diktats, and under conditions where other countries also opposed this one-sided cuts policy, a democratic EU could not simply ignore the voters’ wishes. At the same time, he stressed that even if his party

bore government responsibility, it would “take seriously the arguments and positions of other governments and continue to negotiate.”

So far, EU officials have not left any doubt that they will neither relax the austerity measures nor suspend them. During his visit to Berlin, Tsipras was rebuffed by the Greens and Social Democratic Party. The parliamentary leader of the Greens, Jürgen Trittin, and the SPD chair Sigmar Gabriel, declared unanimously after meeting with Tsipras that there was no alternative to the cuts for Greece.

Gabriel spoke in favour of a growth pact after the meeting, but added: “Whoever forms the next Greek government must know, however, that agreements must be adhered to [...] No one should expect that Germany and the European donor countries will honour their financial commitments, when a new Greek government is not willing to,” said Gabriel.

The Left Party, which acted as host for Tsipras’ visit to Berlin, has repeatedly made clear that for it, there is nothing binding about an election programme when it comes to government policy. As soon as they were in government, their limited social election demands were dropped. In alliance with the SPD, the Left Party governed in the capital for ten years and caused a social disaster. With his appearance in Berlin, Alexis Tsipras has made clear that nothing different can be expected from SYRIZA.



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