

SYRIZA deepens European Union ties as austerity intensifies in Greece

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“The man who fueled the nightmares of EU leaders just a few months ago actually looks quite mild. Alexis Tsipras sits with his accurately combed side parting and a friendly smile in a meeting room of the Brussels European Parliament. He has nothing in common with a rabble-rouser or class warrior. If he wore a tie, he might pass for a Greek version of [Bavarian right-wing politician] Markus Söder.”

These were the words chosen by the arch-conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* to describe the chairman of the Greek Coalition of the Alternative Left (SYRIZA). It reflects not only Tsipras’s own amicable stance towards the European Union (EU), but also the positive attitude of the European ruling classes to his organisation. The more class struggles intensify in Europe, the more pseudo-left forces such as SYRIZA are called upon to stimulate illusions that the ruling class will resolve the crisis by itself on terms favourable to the workers.

Last week, Tsipras toured Europe and spoke first to the European Parliament and later the president of the parliament, the German Social Democrat Martin Schulz, in Brussels. Schultz warmly welcomed his guest. Tsipras then spoke at a rally in Hamburg on Saturday, stressing that his party was not opposed to EU institutions, but rather sought to support them. Tsipras had already met a few weeks ago with Horst Reichenbach, the head of the EU Task Force for Greece.

These visits took place as the EU and the Greek government intensified austerity measures in Greece. On Monday, the Greek government coalition, consisting of the conservative New Democracy (ND), the social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left (DIMAR), presented its budget for 2013 to parliament. The budget projects an economic decline of 6.5 percent

this year and 3.8 percent next year—figures regarded as optimistic by many experts.

Mass poverty, low wages and unemployment, which already dominate Greek life, will worsen as a result of the recent austerity package dictated by the EU, calling for an additional €13.5 billion (US\$17 billion) in cuts.

There is growing popular opposition to this third austerity package, which almost exclusively benefits international banks and corporations. Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (ND) is having increasing difficulty enforcing the cuts, as strikes and protests spread and as workers in local administrations refuse to implement the laws that he is passing.

Under these conditions SYRIZA assumes growing significance for the ruling elite. In 2009, the ND ceded power to the opposition party, PASOK, hoping that the latter, with its links to the trade unions, would be better placed to enforce budget cuts demanded by the banks. Now, three years later, SYRIZA is preparing to play the same role. It not only has influence in the trade unions, it also has close ties with myriad Greek petty-bourgeois pseudo-left groups with which it hopes to keep social opposition under control.

After the election, SYRIZA pledged not to organize strikes or protests. Now, it is backing token protests, such as 24-hour general strikes organized by the trade unions.

Tsipras has declared that SYRIZA is prepared to form a new government “first thing tomorrow”. In the parliamentary elections in June, SYRIZA took second place behind ND, with 27 percent of the vote.

Since the election in June, Tsipras has sought to appease popular opposition to the cuts by raising a number of social demands, such as an end to austerity measures. However, a closer look reveals that his promises are empty.

Since the election campaign, he has abandoned demands such as the reversal of privatizations and previous austerity measures—demands that he cynically advanced while pledging to repay Greece’s debts to the financial markets and the European Union.

Instead, SYRIZA has concentrated on merely criticizing the current austerity package. Should it be implemented, it declares, the chances of international creditors redeeming their loans would be jeopardized because national bankruptcy would be inevitable.

As an alternative, SYRIZA is calling for a European Debt Conference to discuss a deferral of interest payments and partial debt relief. Using the example of the London Debt Agreement of 1953, which relieved Germany of much of its debt, Tsipras speaks of the necessity of a “Marshall Plan” for Greece to boost economic growth and enable it to pay its debts on time.

He refrains from challenging the debts Greek workers are now being called upon to repay. Instead, he wants to create conditions for repayments to the banks and foreign governments to continue. “SYRIZA stands for economic, social and geopolitical stability,” Tsipras assured businessmen at a trade fair in northern Greece on September 15.

He used the same speech to once again stress his support for reactionary EU institutions: “The role of SYRIZA today is not to dissolve European cohesion,” he declared. The party merely wants to correct the EU’s “tortuous path.”

In an interview with the Argentine newspaper *Página* two weeks ago, Tsipras was more specific, calling for closer political union and more powers for the continent’s central bank. He said: “The euro is a unique phenomenon worldwide. We have a common currency, that is, a monetary union, but we lack a political union and a European Central Bank able to provide assistance to every country in Europe.”

As a role model for such a perspective, Tsipras named Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti. At the Greek trade fair, he declared: “In this election we missed the opportunity to have today a government capable of gaining everything that is due to the Greek people, namely that which others gained at the last summit of June 26, e.g., the prime minister of Italy, who achieved the direct recapitalization of banks without burdening his country’s public debt.”

In fact, in exchange for assurances of financial

support, Monti has enforced deep social cuts this year amounting to €26 billion.

In line with this perspective, SYRIZA is increasingly making nationalist appeals. On September 16, Tsipras addressed a demonstration in Greece and declared he wanted to make a “patriotic and democratic” invitation to all Greeks to rebuild the country. At another point in his speech, he added, “This road will not be paved with a red carpet and rose petals,” thereby preparing the population for a new wave of sacrifices.



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