SYRIZA’s “anti-oligarch” policy: A call to global finance to raid Greece

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Opinion polls show SYRIZA , the Coalition of the Radical Left, set to be the overall winner of the January 25 Greek general election.

Since finishing a close second to New Democracy in the 2012 election, SYRIZA has developed its programme in consultation with representatives of international capital. While assuring the ruling elite internationally, in the words of party leader Alexis Tsipras, that they have “nothing to fear from SYRIZA,” the party is careful to camouflage this with left-sounding phrases when it addresses the Greek population.

Last week, SYRIZA declared that if it came to power, it would confront Greece’s “oligarchs” and, in the words of the *Financial Times* (FT), “tame” them. The content of its proposals belies such claims.

SYRIZA used the pages of the FT to announce its “anti-oligarch” policy, with George Stathakis, the party’s shadow development minister and one of Tsipras’s closest economic advisers, granting an interview. The FT noted that, whereas SYRIZA “burst on to the political scene three years ago by vilifying the country’s international lenders. … Now, as the party moves closer to power, it is declaring a new public enemy: the oligarchs who exercise disproportionate sway over the Greek economy.”

The FT described Stathakis as “market friendly,” saying that he “sought to rebut criticism from Premier Antonis Samaras that a party with communist roots would threaten to crash the country out of the Eurozone and devastate its business sector.”

Stathakis said, “We want to make life easier for businesspeople, to help remove problems with bureaucracy that they complain about.…”

Stathakis, said the FT, “drew a distinction with politically-connected enterprises that hurt competition and stifled economic activity,” adding that he argues, “If the oligarchs’ role in the economy can be shrunk, *there will be more space for competitive businesses to emerge*” [emphasis added].

This is music to the FT’s ears. It is trumpeting SYRIZA’s policy, because it offers the opportunity for rich pickings for the *global* financial oligarchy. In this case, the medium is the message. The FT, which has published a slew of pro-SYRIZA commentary in recent weeks, wrote approvingly that “an oligarch crackdown is one Syriza proposal that *could find favour in Brussels and Berlin, where such entities are blamed for blocking reform*” [emphasis added].

While Greece’s economy is only a small fraction of Europe’s overall, it retains a large shipping industry. Even though its share has fallen in the last decade, at 15.4 percent and more than 3,000 vessels, Greece remains top of the world’s ship-owning fleet chart, ahead of Japan, China, Germany and the United States.

The more lucrative prize awaiting the international financial aristocracy is the potentially vast quantities of oil and gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean that remain untapped. In 2010, it was estimated that over four billion barrels of oil are located in the northern Aegean Sea, with at least 22 billion barrels in the Ionian Sea off the west coast of Greece. In 2013, a senior government official said that Greece may be able to produce 4.7 trillion cubic meters of natural gas over 30 years—enough to supply 25 percent of Europe’s needs.

Greece’s location in the Mediterranean and its proximity to the Middle East is vital geo-politically. Confronting China and Russia in this region is a critical part of the predatory plans of the major imperialist powers.

China is seeking to make Greece and its huge port at Piraeus its “gateway to Europe.” Five years ago, the China Ocean Shipping Company acquired the management rights of half of the Port of Piraeus for 35 years in a deal worth €500 million. The FT noted last year, “Greek-owned ships carry 60 percent of oil, iron ore, coal and other commodities imported by China. Greek owners are also the biggest customers of Chinese shipyards with almost 200 vessels on order.”

By 2014, annual trade between Greece and China had risen to €2.5 billion. On top of this, Greece and China signed shipping, trade and energy deals worth €3.4 billion during a three-day visit to Athens last year by Li Keqiang, the Chinese premier.

For the ruling elite internationally, the “struggle” against the Greek oligarchs is code language for completing its operation to destroy what remains of the social and economic gains of the working class. They want to create the basis for their own exploitation of the working class by supplanting the Greek oligarchic families.

In a December 2012 article, the *New York Times* railed against Greece’s “opaque, closed economy,” noting that “several dozen powerful families control critical sectors, including banking, shipping and construction,” and can usually count on governments “passing legislation tailored to their specific needs.”

Foreign Affairs ran an article in its December 2014 issue headlined, “Misrule of the Few: How the Oligarchs Ruined Greece.”

The article warned, “Even as European lenders have put the country’s finances under a microscope,” the rule of the oligarchs “has held”. It noted, “To the benefit of a favored few, *cumbersome regulations and dysfunctional institutions* remain largely unchanged.…” [emphasis added].

Getting down to fundamentals, it stated that under the rule of conservative New Democracy Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis (2004-2009), the government “lost control of public finances.”

This followed the rule of the social democratic PASOK in the 1980s ,when “within a decade, the civil service had doubled in size.”

Foreign Affairs aims its fire at the “highly organized interest groups [who] have profited the most under Greek law: first, elite professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, and engineers, and second, unionized employees of utilities owned wholly or partially by the state, Public Power Corporation and the Hellenic Railways Organization.”

It bemoans a system in which the “professionals and the unions have won extraordinary privileges.”

The magazine writes that in 1999, the “Greek government made an open-ended promise to prevent cuts to the Public Power Corporation’s pension fund. In 2012, at the height of the financial crisis, this commitment amounted to over $800 million.”

For *Foreign Affairs*, the pension rights of workers amount to “cumbersome regulations” in a “dysfunctional” system that must be eradicated.

The terrible suffering inflicted on the Greek population since the 2008 global financial crash by the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund has not been enough. *Foreign Affairs*, after noting that millions of Greeks now live in severe poverty, declares, “after seven years of recession, none of the major political parties has proposed any serious reforms to the welfare state.…”

While SYRIZA claims it will lead the fight against Greek oligarchic interests, the oligarchs are seeking relations within both the majority Tsipras faction of SYRIZA and the anti-European Union “left wing” of the party.

The FT observes, “The oligarchs have reacted to Syriza’s rise by trying to build bridges with Alexis Tsipras, the party leader, and his team in meetings and discussions, sometimes through intermediaries.” Citing comments by a Piraeus university economist, it noted that “some oligarchs would prefer Greece to leave the euro—a view shared by Syriza’s extreme left faction but not the party leadership.”

SYRIZA has been cultivating relations with Greece’s most influential oligarchs for some time. In 2013, *Time* magazine reported on a December 2012 meeting of the Union of Greek Shipowners, at which “SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras voiced his support for the ‘continued leading role of Greek shipping’ in the international market.”

Time said that Stathakis was present at the meeting, and he told the magazine “that his party does not plan to repeal the exemptions on non-distributed profits or on the capital gains of Greek-based shipping companies. The only significant change proposed, he says, is that shipping dividends will no longer be exempt from personal income taxation.”