

Syriza hands Greek defence ministry to right-wing nationalist

Robert Stevens
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The first meeting of the cabinet named by the Syriza-Independent Greeks (ANEL) coalition government was televised on Wednesday, with Prime Minister and Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras declaring that his government would not come into conflict with the international financial elite.

Syriza would not seek a “mutually destructive clash,” Tsipras said, adding that “our priority is a new renegotiation with our partners, seeking a just, viable and mutually beneficial solution.” He called the coalition a government of “national salvation.”

The most significant appointment was that of Panos Kammenos, the leader of the right-wing nationalist Independent Greeks, who was handed control of the Ministry of Defence. He has built close links to the military in recent years and demanded ANEL be given control over defence during the talks held Monday with Tsipras to form the coalition.

There can be no doubt that in the background the military is considering a possible takeover at some point as the economic crisis deepens and opposition to the new government intensifies in the working class. The implications of a right-wing figure like Kammenos overseeing the military—in a country where, as recently as 1974, a CIA-backed military regime was in power—are ominous.

Syriza is a coalition of pseudo-left forces including Stalinists, Maoists, former PASOK figures and ecological tendencies. One of its leading members is the lifelong Stalinist Giannis Dragasakis, who is to serve as Tsipras’s deputy. Dragasakis is a proponent of public sector “reforms”—that is, job cuts and productivity increases. He recently said, “Even if the debt were zero, we would have problems without the necessary reforms in the state and civil administration.”

While in the Communist Party of Greece (KKE),

Dragasakis served as a junior minister for several months in the 1989-1990 “ecumenical” government that the KKE joined alongside the right-wing New Democracy (ND) and the social democratic PASOK party.

The Finance Ministry, charged with overseeing the government’s upcoming negotiations with the European Union (EU) and international banks on repaying Greece’s debts of more than €300 billion, was given to Yanis Varoufakis. Taking over the ministry, Varoufakis echoed Tsipras, declaring: “There won’t be a duel between us and the EU.... There won’t be any threats.”

Varoufakis was recently a professor of economic theory and held a visiting post at the University of Texas. He has authored several versions of “A Modest Proposal for Resolving the Eurozone Crisis,” the first of which was written with former UK Labour Party MP Stuart Holland. The final version, released in July 2013, was published jointly with US economist J.K. Galbraith. In June 2013, Varoufakis and Galbraith wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* titled “Only Syriza Can Save Greece.”

They assured the ruling elite internationally that a Syriza government “wouldn’t be a bad thing for Europe or the United States.” Were Syriza to be elected, they wrote, “nothing vital would change for the United States.” They continued: “Syriza doesn’t intend to leave NATO or close American military bases.”

Varoufakis has intimate knowledge of Greek bourgeois politics, having been an economic advisor to PASOK’s former leader George Papandreou for three years to 2006. Papandreou went on to lead the 2009 PASOK government, which imposed the first round of austerity cuts in Greece. PASOK continued this role as part of successive coalition governments before being

thrown out of office last week.

Varoufakis is an avowed defender of capitalism and has advocated the reduction of Greece's corporate tax rate to 15 percent. He told the BBC's *Today* programme that Syriza's aims were for "genuine reforms that we need to implement in this country to put an end to the bureaucracy" and to "create a rational plan for debt restructure."

Asked if he wanted the banks to write off half of Greece's debt, as Syriza had previously proposed, he replied, "No, no, no, there is a lot of posturing before every negotiation...there has been a bit of posturing on our side. What really matters is that now we sit down and discuss a way in which the haircut to our debt, the debt write-down is minimised. We don't want to pay back less than we can."

Syriza planned to "bind our repayments to our growth," he added. "We want to make them [Greece's creditors] partners to our recovery."

After citing one of the first statements made by Varoufakis in office, that Greeks should live "frugally" in the future, the *Financial Times* commented, "There would be no explosion in public spending by the new administration, Mr. Varoufakis pledged."

Tsipras is speaking to two audiences and, in the initial stage of the government, playing a delicate balancing act. Syriza is seeking to assure the EU and global capital of its intention to repay Greece's debts, while carrying out some immediate measures to placate, and dupe, those who elected it in the expectation that it would carry out progressive social change. Tsipras told his cabinet that ministers "must not disappoint the voters who gave us a mandate."

Panagiotis Lafazanis, another veteran Stalinist and leader of the party's "Left Platform," was handed the Ministry of Productive Reconstruction, Environment and Energy. He announced yesterday that several proposed privatisations would be halted, including the Public Power Corporation and the Independent Power Transmission Operator. The full privatisation of Greece's biggest and strategically vital port, Piraeus, would be postponed, and 595 public sector cleaners who were fired by the last government under its "mobility scheme" would be rehired.

Most of these measures entail hardly any expense. This was acknowledged by Syriza Deputy Social Security Minister Dimitris Stratoulis, who said: "What

we have said during the election campaign will be our guide, starting with measures that do not have a large spending impact."

However, even these token gestures are too much for the representatives of the financial elite. The head of the euro group of finance ministers, Dutch Finance Minister Jeroen Dijsselbloem, responded to the new government by insisting, "The message 'we want your support but not your conditions' won't fly."

Greek bank shares suffered their worst one-day loss on record, with the country's four biggest lenders—Piraeus, the National Bank of Greece, Eurobank and Alpha Bank—plummeting by more than 25 percent.

German Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel commented that "Citizens of other euro states have a right to see that the deals linked to their acts of solidarity are upheld."

Syriza knows that this is its responsibility, and it is already preparing for a resurgence of social opposition. This was the real meaning of the first statement of Yiannis Panousis, a former deputy of the Democratic Left, a right-wing split-off from Syriza, who was named an alternate minister in the Ministry of the Interior with a remit for "citizen's protection."

In the clearest indication that Syriza will do its utmost to defend the capitalist state, Panousis said, "The police will have weapons at protests, but that doesn't mean that they will intimidate and terrorise."

Syriza had previously pledged to abolish riot police units and merge them with the general police force. Panousis's qualification should be dismissed by workers with contempt, given the brutality that the police have unleashed against protesters over the last five years.

The Greek police force is a well-known bastion of support for right-wing and fascistic parties. Between 40 and 50 percent of police officers reportedly voted for the fascist Golden Dawn party in Sunday's election, the same percentage as in the 2012 election.



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