

A comment from a reader: The peculiar socialism of Syriza

21 February 2015

The World Socialist Web Site received the following comment from Evel Economakis, a high school teacher living in Athens, Greece. We are publishing it here with the agreement of its author. In sending the comment, Economakis wrote that he hoped it would “shed light on the contradictory nature of the new Syriza government,” noting that “this is important because a lot of left-leaning voters around Europe are putting their faith in Syriza.”

The Peculiar Socialism of Syriza

On January 25th, Syriza, the left-wing party of Alexis Tsipras, won the national elections. That evening, my friend “Karma” (his nickname), a Greek-American living in Athens, sent me this text message: “I went downtown for the victory speech, and was blown away. We’re NOT in Kansas any more! No more Carmina Burana: they played Pink Floyd, The Clash, Bella Ciao, Springsteen and Patti Smith!”

I texted Karma back, saying how glad I was but also expressed my fears Syriza, an acronym that means “Coalition of the Radical Left,” would backpedal on its pre-election promises. “Yup,” my friend soon replied, “we’re all hoping for the best but Syriza’s proclaimed goal is not to overthrow the status quo. Instead, it wants to bargain for a kinder, gentler form of impalement.”

Ours were minority views. In the week immediately following the victory, most people on the left rejoiced that better days had finally arrived to long-suffering Greece. By contrast, those with right-of-center sympathies sounded the alarm that the new government would tax businesses into oblivion (many even said “they’ll take our houses from us!”) and that the country would unceremoniously be kicked out of the European Union.

Similarly outside Greece: socialist voters across Europe are looking to Syriza to provide hope in a continent with more than its fair share of right-wing governments. For right-wingers, however, the pre-election promises made to the Greek people by Tsipras are socialist, even extremist—a view projected by Angela Merkel in Berlin and the Troika in Brussels and New York.

There are many things progressive people find endearing about Syriza and its leaders. Like their vows to support the numerous grassroots initiatives that sprung up since 2010, when the Troika put the screws on Greece: soup kitchens, supermarket baskets where people can donate canned food to the indigent, various socialist “Craig’s lists” offering all manner of goods and services free of charge. The laid-back dress code of Syriza ministers has also been praised here, as has their refusal to travel first class, or accept perks the ministers of previous governments enjoyed, including limos, chauffeurs and bodyguards.

Syriza came to power on the pledge that it would renounce the country’s 327 billion euro debt, kick out the Troika bailiffs and put an end to austerity that has plagued the country for the last five years. Ever since January 25th, the government has pledged to stop taxing the very poor, prohibit the confiscation of homes by banks, halt the privatisation of two ports in Greece, increase the minimum wage and rehire some public sector workers.

A wonderful, fresh new wind is blowing here. Just the other day, upon returning to his office in the parliament building from a lightning trip to Berlin to argue for kinder, gentler treatment, Prime Minister Tsipras found an envelope on his desk with 550 Euros in it—reimbursement for his airline ticket. “What’s this?” he asked his aides. When told, he returned the cash to the government’s coffers and instructed his people to put an end to such practices.

Many in Greece are equally impressed with Minister of Finance Yannis Varoufakis. Last week, a liberal blogger spotted him at 1:30 a.m. walking alone on Amalias Avenue near Syntagma Square, pulling a wheeled travel bag and talking on his hands-free kit. The social media immediately caught fire: “Be careful Yannis, we don’t have many like you!” and “What are you doing late at night with no security, man? Remember, you are our Minister of Finance!”

Everyone here knows Varoufakis is the scion of an extremely wealthy family (his father was president of Halivourgiki, Greece’s second-largest steel producer). Few hold his background against him. After all, as one blogger noted, “History is full of examples of rich people who betrayed their class and sided with the less fortunate, and Varoufakis has described himself as a Marxist.”

But let’s give Syriza a closer look. The first question that’s on the lips of many on the left is why it chose ANEL, or the Party of Independent Greeks, for its junior partner in government. ANEL includes extreme right-wingers, with some members having made explicitly anti-Semitic statements and expressed the wish for immigrants in Greece to “go back to their own countries”. Equally bizarre is Tsipras’ choice of Panagiotis Pavlopoulos for President of the Republic, announced on February 17, a center-right politician who served as Interior Minister between 2004 and 2009.

The odd make-up of the government is reflected in the way the ministers dress. While many refuse to wear ties, and some don’t even tuck in their shirts, others don three-piece suits.

Yannis Varoufakis has been shuttling back and forth between Athens, Berlin and Brussels, hands cupped asking for money. He’s prompted a great deal of speculation about his untucked shirt

and lack of a tie. The Cuban revolutionaries wore combat fatigues, which was fine because they told all their creditors to buzz off. That made sense. This does not.

Syriza swept to power on Greek nationalist and anti-German rhetoric. How progressive is that? Not to mention that its demands—though laudable—are actually quite modest. All these self-described “radical leftists” have put on the European table is the request to spend less on interest and more on things like health care and aid to the destitute. Great stuff, but it isn’t socialism. If it is, then Barack Obama is a socialist, too.

For the past three years Varoufakis has spoken to diverse audiences ranging from anti-austerity demonstrators in Athens’ Syntagma Square, staff at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Green parliamentarians in the European parliament, Bloomberg analysts in London and New York, the House of Commons in London, and hedge funds in Manhattan and London’s City. The one group he has not spoken to are simple working people. This is odd, to say the least, for a self-proclaimed Marxist, even an erratic one.

He also adopted Merkelist propaganda in a recent interview addressed to the German public, when he said they “paid so much money to Greeks.” Quite the contrary, no money came to the Greek people; instead it went to usurers and the bankocracy. The average Greek, whose monthly income is well below that of most Europeans, was—and still is—compelled to pay interest rates needed to service loans that save no one but German, French, US, Chinese, and—yes—Greek bankers. Personally, my wife and I, who are fortunate enough to have jobs (we are both teachers) have been driven to the wall by all sorts of new taxes we can’t afford to pay. Our two young children have long ago gotten used to the fact their parents can’t buy them new clothes, or toys, or even go out once in a while to a restaurant together.

Many people who are to the left of Syriza—the KKE, or Communist Party of Greece, and Antarsia (this acronym spells “rebellion”), a conglomeration of Trotskyists—are highly critical of Varoufakis’ declarations that he does not want to replace capitalism with socialism. By his own admission, he is embarking upon a campaign for stabilizing the European socio-economic system to avoid the ascendancy of right-wing Golden Dawn racist fanatics. He says he is adamantly against the disintegration of the Eurozone. His critics to the left accuse him of practicing a modern-day form of appeasement. They argue that fascism is born of capitalism in crisis and that you can’t save the system from the fascists because fascists aren’t anti-capitalists and pose no threat to capitalism.

Greece’s Minister of Finance has surprised supporters by saying he wants alliances “even with right-wingers”. He describes as “genuinely radical” his pursuit of a “modest agenda for stabilising a system that I despise”, and admits to “running the risk of surreptitiously lessening the sadness from ditching any hope of replacing capitalism in my lifetime by indulging a feeling of having become agreeable to the circles of polite society.”

Not surprisingly, many to the left of Syriza, but also increasing voices from within the party, bemoan the fact that an increasing number of mega-capitalists have recently come forward to say they support Tsipras’ new government—people like shipping and steel

magnate George Angelopoulos and petroleum and banking tycoon Spiros Latsis.

Varoufakis claims he wants to save capitalism for “strategic purposes”, from itself. Nowhere does he mention what he, Tsipras and Syriza intend to do once they have “saved” capitalism. How sweet this must all sound to big businessmen and bankers in Athens, London, Berlin, Paris, Madrid and New York.

Will the new government in Athens move dynamically against Berlin and Brussels? Strange as it sounds, if Syriza has the guts to do so, it will have the support of the ultra-nationalist bigots. This in turn will blunt the Nazis and sharpen the left. If Tsipras’ government does not, the cannibals will return with a vengeance once it falls.

Is the real dilemma between capitalism and fascism, as Varoufakis suggests? Or does Greece, indeed the planet, desperately need a more humane, reasonable and responsible way of managing its human and natural resources?

Many people here are praying Syriza has opened a door no one can shut; they hope the new government in Athens will infect Europe with a new democratic ethos that will wipe away the unfair trade relations between southern Europe and the stronger powers in Berlin and Paris. But how will this alter the reality that the world is in a deep depression? How will this save us all from the sight of the smoke of our world burning, from another world war, or—which is more likely—a move towards a new, modern form of feudalism?

My friend Karma texted me yesterday: “Syriza,” he said, “was given the choice between capitalism and socialism. It chose capitalism, and it will be swept away by fascists.”

Evel Economakis

Athens, Greece

February 19, 2015



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact