

The capitulation of Syriza and the lessons for the working class

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The petty-bourgeoisie is “capable, as we shall see, of nothing but ruining any movement that entrusts itself to its hands.”—Friedrich Engels (1852).

It has taken less than one month for the Syriza government in Greece, led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, to repudiate its anti-austerity election program and betray, totally and utterly, the impoverished working people whose votes placed it in power.

Even in the entire squalid history of “left” petty-bourgeois politics, it is difficult to find an example of deceit, cynicism and truly disgusting cowardice that quite matches that of Prime Minister Tsipras. Certainly, from the standpoint of the time that elapsed between election and betrayal, the Syriza government has probably set a new world record.

In the hours following an agreement that is nothing less than a complete capitulation to the European Union, Tsipras let loose another barrage of demagogic lies in a pathetic attempt to deny the magnitude of Syriza’s prostration and to cover up his own political bankruptcy.

“We kept Greece standing and dignified,” declared Tsipras, in a televised statement that seemed oblivious to reality. He claimed that the agreement with Eurogroup finance ministers “cancels austerity.” Tsipras added: “In a few days we have achieved a lot, but we have a long road. We have taken a decisive step to change course within the euro zone.”

Not a word of this is true. The Eurogroup statement signed by Syriza commits its government to “refrain from any rollback of measures and unilateral changes to the policies and structural reforms.” In other words, the Greek government will continue to enforce the existing austerity measures implemented by the previous government.

Moreover, Syriza is to prepare further “reform measures, based on the current arrangement,” specified in the hated Memorandum, which Tsipras had previously pledged to repudiate. And though Syriza had insisted that it would write down Greece’s enormous debt, the agreement with the Eurogroup states that the country will “honor their financial obligations to all their creditors fully and in a timely manner.”

Far from cutting off ties with the “troika,” the government has now promised to “work in close agreement with European and international institutions and partners,” specifically mentioning the European Central Bank and the IMF, which together with the EU make up the troika. As before, “any disbursement of the

outstanding tranche of the current [European Financial Stability Facility] programme” depends on a review by “the institutions.” Thus, Greece is to remain in the stranglehold of the troika.

Tsipras and his negotiating partner, Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, received no concessions from the European Union other than minor changes in the wording of the agreement, which have no practical significance whatsoever.

While Tsipras and Syriza apologists attempt to present the government’s miserable betrayal as a heroic victory, the capitalist press in Europe and the United States has not minced words about the scale of the prime minister’s capitulation.

“If this was meant to be the challenge to German economic orthodoxy, it failed,” writes the *Financial Times* of London. “The Germans prevailed on all the substantive issues.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* states, “With the new government led by the left-wing Syriza party, Greece is continuing the old bailout program. Funding will only be provided if the country undertakes reforms.”

Le Monde describes the agreement bluntly: “Athens is promising to finish the work of the previous conservative government of Antonis Samaras, enacting reforms imposed by the troika of creditors (IMF, ECB, EU) that have not yet been implemented.”

And *The Wall Street Journal*, enjoying the spectacle of Tsipras’ surrender to the EU, predicts further humiliations. In an article titled “Tsipras Can Expect More Humble Pie,” the principal voice of US finance capital writes: “Mr. Tsipras has capitulated on many issues in the past week ... But he will have to capitulate on plenty more if he is serious about putting Greece’s place in the euro zone once again beyond doubt.”

From the standpoint of the interests of the working class, the agreement signed by the Syriza government is a criminal betrayal. But from the standpoint of the real social and economic interests represented by the Syriza regime—sections of the Greek ruling elite and the affluent upper middle class—the deal is no more than a disappointment. Notwithstanding Tsipras’ demagoguery—intended mainly to deceive and disorient the working people of Greece—the negotiating strategy of Syriza was determined entirely by its subordination to capitalist interests.

The Greek ruling class and the upper middle class may have hoped to achieve an easing of conditions that inhibited the access of Greek-owned businesses to financial credits. But they had no desire for a confrontation with EU bankers and were utterly opposed to any measures that might destabilize European

capitalism, let alone threaten their own corporate and financial interests in Greece.

The real economic and social agenda of the Syriza government was made entirely clear by Yanis Varoufakis in his remarks, behind closed doors, at a February 11 meeting of the Eurogroup. “We are committed to deep structural reforms,” he stated, adding that the Syriza government “will be the most reform-oriented government in Greek modern history, and among the most enthusiastic reformers in Europe.”

Lest there be any mistaking Syriza’s commitment to the protection of capitalist interests, Varoufakis declared: “On privatization and the development of publicly owned assets, the government is utterly undogmatic; we are ready and willing to evaluate each and every one project on its merits alone. *Media reports that the Piraeus port privatization was reversed could not be further from the truth.*” [Emphasis added]

Varoufakis also denounced “misleading reports” that “have caused misunderstandings with our partners by insinuating that we have rolled back previous reforms and added to our budget.”

Far from contemplating an exit from the euro zone, Varoufakis assured his “dear colleagues” that Syriza considered Europe to be “whole and indivisible, and the government of Greece considers that Greece is a permanent and inseparable member of the European Union and our monetary union.”

Finally, Varoufakis assured the euro zone finance ministers that they had absolutely nothing to fear from Syriza. He regretted that there were some who were displeased by Syriza’s victory. “To them I have this to say,” Varoufakis proclaimed. “It would be a lost opportunity to see us as adversaries.”

Indeed, Varoufakis was so successful in convincing the ministers of Syriza’s utter subservience to the troika that they saw no need to make any concessions at all. Having nothing to fear from the Syriza government, they treated it with same combination of contempt and ruthlessness that large banks usually display in their dealings with failing small businesses.

The events of the past month constitute a major political experience for the working class in Greece, Europe and internationally. The role played by Syriza is a devastating exposure of the essentially reactionary character of a form of “left” middle class politics that developed amidst the ruins of the radical student politics of the 1960s and 1970s. While the working class was led to defeat after defeat by the old Stalinist, social democratic and reformist labor organizations, sections of the middle class benefited, directly and indirectly, from the explosive rise in global stock exchanges following the accession of Thatcher and Reagan to power and the international ascendancy—especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in China—of neo-liberal policies.

As it grew increasingly affluent, the social and political attitude of sections of the privileged middle class toward the working class passed from estrangement and indifference to increasing hostility. This socio-economic process was reflected in the ideological repudiation, by these layers, of Marxism, whose identification with the revolutionary role of the working class and the struggle against capitalism had become totally unacceptable.

In place of the politics of proletarian class struggle, the affluent

middle class embraced a panoply of “identity agendas”—of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation—which formed the base of the political program upon which it pursued its interests. Far from desiring any overturn of capitalist class relations, this affluent social milieu and its political parties have been preoccupied, principally, with achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth within the richest 10 percent of society. Envious of the extremely rich, they despise and fear the working class.

Syriza is only the most prominent of the countless political organizations spawned by this socio-economic process. It differs from such organizations as the Left Party in Germany and Podemos in Spain, not to mention many smaller groups throughout the world, only in that it is the first to assume the leadership of a national government.

The *World Socialist Web Site’s* characterization of these parties as pseudo-left is not a rhetorical exercise but a precise political definition. They are bourgeois parties representing elite sections of the middle class that are bitterly hostile to the workers. They are not allies but relentless enemies. Working people must break with them, and seek to destroy any political influence they have over the working class.

Syriza’s various apologists, who only weeks ago hailed its election as “a new dawn for the Greek people” and “a mighty step forward,” will, no doubt, declare that nothing else could have been done. In supporting Syriza, they reveal their class interests.

As for Syriza, having endorsed the program of austerity and reaction, it is placing itself in direct conflict with the working class. As he seeks to impose the dictates of the banks in Greece, Tsipras will have to rely ever more directly on the state and police to suppress working class opposition. The pseudo-left forces that have backed the Syriza government will fall in line.

The working class cannot demand more radical policies from governments staffed by Syriza or other pseudo-left groups. It can only defend itself by building new working class parties that are entirely independent of all sections of the capitalist class, based on an internationalist revolutionary program, directed toward the establishment of workers’ power, the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a world socialist society. This is the historic task to which the International Committee of the Fourth International is committed.



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