

UK Socialist Workers Party and Left Platform debate: Joint apologists for Syriza

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On July 5, more than 60 percent of the Greek electorate voted “no” to further austerity in a referendum called by the Syriza-led government, defying the demands of the European Union, the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and threats from the Greek political and media establishment and military.

Syriza’s response has been to carry out a shameless betrayal of the working class, agreeing to implement an even harsher austerity programme than that rejected in the referendum. On July 10, the Greek parliament voted by 251 out of 300 MPs to accept the deal. The fascist Golden Dawn and Syriza’s junior coalition partner ANEL voted against. Two Syriza MPs voted “no”, eight abstained and seven absented themselves.

The events in Greece represent a major strategic experience for the international working class. Above all, they have clearly exposed the class character and political role of Syriza and similar pseudo-left parties internationally. These organisations represent privileged layers of the upper middle class, who lauded Syriza as a “model” in order to prevent the development of an independent movement of the Greek working class in unity with workers throughout Europe and the world against austerity, war and the profit system.

Last Saturday, Stathis Kouvelakis, Syriza central committee member and leader of the Left Platform (an amalgam of various pseudo-left tendencies within Syriza) attended the Marxism 2015 “festival” for a debate with Socialist Workers Party (SWP) leader Alex Callinicos. A similar debate was held between the two in February, shortly after Syriza came to power, during which Callinicos exclaimed, “Revolutionary socialists should celebrate the new government’s victory and support the progressive measures it takes.”

Just one day after the parliament voted to endorse Tsipras’ surrender, Kouvelakis provided his own apologia and self-justification: “We went to the final of the championship of the class struggle but I’m afraid we lost the match. I’d like to bring positive news but that it is not the case.”

Without embarrassment, he explained that 15 Left Platform MPs had voted in favour of the austerity programme with only two voting against. Like Pontius Pilate, the Left Platform issued a statement in solidarity with those who voted “no” in the referendum and stating that it did not accept the austerity package “as such.”

Kouvelakis said that the new and worse austerity measures were

a “disastrous” outcome of the most interesting “political experiment” in left politics in decades, the effects of which would be “far reaching” and “unpredictable”.

He then insisted that it was impermissible to apply “ready-made formulations and certainties that have been used innumerable times in the past,” above all to say a betrayal had taken place. Betrayal was not a “particularly useful category to understand political processes... the notion of betrayal means that you have a pre-established plan that comes to fruition, people have somehow manipulated public opinion... they come to power and then they betray... that was the plan, that’s what they wanted to do.”

Instead, Kouvelakis told his receptive audience, what had happened was the “failure of a political strategy” by Syriza, which believed that it could appeal to the “benevolent nature” of the EU to accept the “minimal transitional demands” of Syriza’s Thessaloniki programme. There was no Plan B if this appeal failed.

He described “the defeat we are facing in Greece has to do with the failure of that strategy. We are paying the price of that. We are paying the price of internalising this ideology of Left Europeanism which, I think, is open to debate.”

To add insult to injury, he then insisted that this defeat should be seen “as a symptom of a more deep ideological defeat of the left as it emerged from the defeats of the revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century.”

Kouvelakis declared that any historical approach seeking to understand the significance of these defeats or Syriza’s betrayal was wrong, asserting, “Even if much broader theoretical issues are at stake in this situation” we should start with a “concrete analysis of the concrete situation.”

Criticisms of Syriza’s alliance with ANEL and failure to tackle the repressive apparatus of the state, he added, cannot “explain what has happened now”.

Kouvelakis said Syriza was not a reformist party, as the SWP says it is, but remains an anti-capitalist and socialist party, which had “internal contradictions not found in reformist parties.” The proof he offered was that the Left Platform had been able to operate in it although with “limitations”. The alternative to doing so was the fate of the Antarsya coalition in which the SWP’s Greek sister party, the Socialist Workers Party of Greece (SEK) operates, which had “nice, inspiring slogans” but remained “as weak as they were.”

Kouvelakis concluded that “Every time I was mistaken it was

because I haven't been sufficiently radical."

"But there is a catch," he added immediately. Being radical means not the repetition of "old recipes" but to "open up our wings to the unknown." He called for "all forces who share fundamentally the same position" to regroup and next time to "just do better... concretely."

Kouvelakis could be brazen about his disgusting opportunism and the betrayal by Syriza and the Left Platform because he was among like-minded friends.

Callinicos, the SWP's main theoretician, began with a ritual hand-wringing saying Syriza had capitulated, which represented "a moment of terrible setback."

He swiftly moved on: "Despite this, Greece is the most important experience in Europe for the left and workers movement since the Portuguese revolution in 1974 where the workers and military marched together under revolutionary banners." That is "the kind of benchmark we are talking about," he added.

In fact, it was the intervention of the military in the form of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) and the promotion of the "alliance of the MFA and the people" by the Portuguese Communist Party that strangled the revolution and led to the re-establishment of bourgeois rule. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International called for a break from the bourgeois parties, the state machine and MFA and demanded the dissolution of the army and the creation of workers', peasants' and soldiers' soviets. (See: Thirty years since the Portuguese Revolution, Part 1)

Callinicos' statement is even more obscene and dangerous, given the intervention of the Greek military into the current political situation. It is an indication that the SWP would play the same role in Greece as their Egyptian co-thinkers, the Revolutionary Socialists, who embraced the military coup of General Sisi.

He insisted that one of the most fundamental disagreements with Kouvelakis was not over "the stuff about strategy," but the idea that "given what happened last Sunday" when the working class took part in what he called a "Gramscian moment"—drawing other sectors of society behind it in a massive "no" vote—that "this is not the end."

Callinicos maintained that Syriza was reformist just like the Labour Party lefts in the 1970s and its actions represented "nothing new here, it is just what reformists do." No account was given of the SWP's support for a party they knew would betray. Callinicos' main aim was to cover up the significance of Syriza's betrayal, a word he did not use, and the exposure of the class character of the pseudo-left.

This was a prelude to his subsequent call for a continued orientation to Syriza via the Left Platform. In his eyes the Syriza model is not exhausted. It has just taken a bad turn and can be pressured to alter course.

Echoing Kouvelakis, Callinicos insisted, "It is not to do with denouncing individuals. That is a waste of time but it's about understanding the flawed logic of a strategy which seeks at a moment of profound crisis of the EU and capitalism generally to improve the condition of ordinary people within the framework of the existing system... This approach has been undermined by this experience."

For the record, Callinicos asked Kouvelakis whether the performance of the Left Platform was "anything to be proud of" when only "one section, no sorry, two members of the Left Platform voted against [austerity]?"

But without pause, he continued by advising the "comrades of the Left Platform" that though they had been "very critical" of the Syriza leadership they had to undertake a "far-greater rebellion" or lose their authority. "If the Left Platform has a future then it has to go out and unite with the comrades of Antarsya and build a much broader and united movement against austerity and challenge this government."

The "whole experience of Syriza" was a vindication, Callinicos asserted, of the SWP's strategy of building "in coalition, in cooperation, with other sections of the left" an external movement that "preserves a theoretical and strategic coherence and an ability to act independently... what has happened to the left inside Syriza is they have lost their ability to act independently." The supposed independence of Antarsya is illusory, like all such groups they act outside larger parent bodies such as Syriza only to better act as their defenders and apologists.

Nonetheless, according to Callinicos all efforts must be directed at all times to winning the Syriza "left" to a unified struggle with Antarsya along with the nationalists of the Greek Communist Party (KKE). "The thing that annoys me about the Left Platform is that they had a legitimacy they could say 'We are the voice of the oxi, we speak for the majority.' That is what the left has to do in Greece and if they do that then the game is very far from over."

According to this logic the fate of the Greek working class is dependent upon a group of MPs who voted for austerity package as part of a government that had perpetrated a massive political fraud against the working class.

Panos Garganos, leader of the SEK, repeated Callinicos's pleas declaring, "What we expect from left-wing MPs of Syriza, no matter how they voted last night... we take them for their word," is to support the call, which Antarsya is "behind", of the Civil Service Unions to prepare a general strike against the deal "and that we will fight together to build a movement to break down the deal."

During the discussion that followed, only one speaker questioned how she would be able to explain what has happened in her workplace other than as a betrayal and warned that Golden Dawn could become the main anti-austerity voice.

As the WSWS explained back in February, events in Greece are proof that "[t]here is no political line that the pseudo-left groups will not cross. They are neither socialist, nor 'left' in any real sense. Rather, they articulate the class interests of a privileged middle class layer who want nothing more than a minor redistribution of wealth so that more ends up in their own pockets. In return, they are ready to assume office and do whatever is asked of them..."



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