Greek parliament endorses EU-dictated austerity programme

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Greek Prime Minister and Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras secured the backing of parliament early Thursday for the savage programme of austerity he agreed with eurozone officials last weekend.

Obtaining passage of the programme was never in doubt. The legislation was overwhelmingly approved by a vote of 229 to 64. There were six abstentions. Three openly pro-austerity parties—New Democracy, PASOK and To Potami—supported the Syriza government's bill. The "no" vote included MPs from the Communist Party (KKE) and the fascist Golden Dawn, along with 32 Syriza MPs.

Outside parliament, there was growing anger over Tsipras' treacherous deal. The public-sector union Adedy held a four-hour strike Wednesday morning. That evening there were several protests in Athens and Thessaloniki. The Communist Party (KKE)-affiliated union federation PAME held a fairly large protest as the parliamentary debate got underway. Demonstrations were also staged by ANTARSYA and anarchists.

The government deployed riot police, who fired tear gas as Molotov cocktails were thrown. Those attacked by the police included members of Syriza's youth organisation.

But within the parliament building, Tsipras secured the votes of his right-wing coalition partners, the Independent Greeks, in addition to the three pro-austerity parties. The Syriza-led coalition has condemned Greek workers and youth to further suffering, to the point where Greece's persecutors in Berlin are talking of combining the austerity measures they demanded with "humanitarian aid."

All eyes were on Syriza's Left Platform, to see whether expected defections would be sufficiently broad to force Tsipras' resignation and fresh elections. Earlier in the day, there were reports that Tsipras had phoned President Prokopis Pavlopoulos amid speculation that a rebellion by 40 MPs would be taken as a vote of no-confidence.

Tsipras told his MPs that a vote against the deal would represent a right-wing coup, intended to prove that an "anti-austerity" government was only a "left intermission." He was backed by Syriza spokesman Nikos Filis, who warned, "If the Syriza government falls, you will be doing a favour to [German Finance Minister Wolfgang] Schäuble and the conservative circles of Europe."

These statements are staggering in their absurdity and hypocrisy. The supposedly "anti-austerity" and "left" Syriza government, elected on a pledge to end EU austerity, is imposing attacks on the jobs, pensions and living standards of Greek workers that go far beyond any accepted by previous governments. It has, moreover, agreed to a de facto dictatorship of the "troika"—the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank—more total and all-embracing than the regime they promised to end. And it has agreed to turn over €50 billion in public assets to a trust controlled by Germany, which will sell off the assets to private speculators and use much of the proceeds to pay off Greece's creditors.

Filis' appeal for Syriza MPs to "vote against their own conscience" was echoed by Panos Kammenos, leader of the Independent Greeks, who declared, "We have to vote against our conscience and back the agreement."

Prior to the parliamentary session, rumblings of dissent were evident. House Speaker Zoe Konstantopoulou, who voted against the government last Friday, was removed from the chair at Tsipras' request. Deputy Finance Minister Nadia Valavani resigned her cabinet post, saying it was "impossible" for her to remain in a government set on imposing such savage austerity measures. Finance Ministry Secretary General Manos Manousakis also quit. A majority of Syriza's Central Committee, 109 out of 201, including 15 MPs, voted to reject the agreement.

Tsipras nevertheless secured the support of most of his party. Among those who voted "no," there was nothing to indicate anything other than a belated attempt to save face by mounting a token protest. The cowardice and lack of principle of the Left Platform, which supported Tsipras to the bitter end, was exemplified by Energy Minister Panagiotis Lafazanis, who said he would vote against the deal but would not seek to bring down the government.

For his pains, he is likely to be removed as part of a cabinet reshuffle to purge even the most fainthearted critics and stack the cabinet with those ready to impose whatever austerity measures are demanded by the EU. Four ministers who have spoken against the terms of the latest bailout will almost certainly leave office. Others, including Labour Minister Panos Skourletis, will be elevated in their place.

Even with a reshuffle, Tsipras' position remains precarious. The government could still fall, with fresh elections as early as the autumn. New Democracy promised to support the government only long enough to get the bailout measures passed into law. To Potami leader Stavros Theodorakis, who controls 17 MPs, said that his party would not join a coalition government with Syriza.

Passing the agreement resolves nothing as far as Greece's descent into financial hell is concerned. It just speeds up the process.

The International Monetary Fund's own debt sustainability analysis declared bluntly, "Greece's public debt has become highly unsustainable … The financing need through end-2018 is now estimated at euro 85 billion, and debt is expected to peak at close to 200 percent of GDP in the next two years, provided that there is an early agreement on a program. Greece's debt can now only be made sustainable through debt relief measures that go far beyond what Europe has been willing to consider so far." The IMF suggested that Greece would need a 30-year moratorium in debt repayments.

Germany will not agree to the type of aid the IMF is proposing, and the IMF is, for its part, demanding that the necessary funds be provided by the EU.

Jack Lew, the US treasury secretary, flew to Europe for talks yesterday with Mario Draghi, head of the European Central Bank. He is meeting with German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble today. But Germany has repeatedly rebuffed appeals from Washington for a debt write-down.