

A letter from Athens: Taking stock of Syriza's capitulation

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The World Socialist Web Site has received the following report from a reader in Athens, Greece, on the reaction to Syriza's agreement on a new round of brutal austerity measures.

The anger here among the 62 percent who voted “no” in the referendum of July 5 can only be described as molten. Characteristically, Danae, a 40-something kindergarten teacher, said this to me as we stood in line at an ATM on July 16: “What happened wasn't a coup by the troika—it was total and unconditional surrender by Syriza.”

Aptly capturing the mood here, the jape circulating in Athens these days concerns the meaning of ATM: in Greek the acronym really stands for “Aristero Trito Mnimonio,” or “Left-wing Third Memorandum.”

Nikos, an unemployed electrician who voted for Syriza, said this to me: “In the last six months, I've lived multiple deaths. Hope came, hope saw, and now hope's gone.”

“You are now an enemy, Mr. Tsipras,” wrote an anonymous left-wing blogger. “Bring out the riot police and the iron police rails—you'll need them.” Another blogger, whose Facebook avatar is “Maria Magdalena,” reminded the prime minister that “No Caesar died peacefully in bed.”

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' nickname among the hard left is now “Tsiprakoglou,” an oblique reference to Georgios Tsolakoglou, the military officer who became the first prime minister of the Greek collaborationist government during the Axis occupation.

Embittered leftists say that history will write the name Alexis Tsipras next to the other leaders who oversaw the previous austerity packages: George Papandreou of PASOK, MIT-trained Lucas Papademos, and far-right Antonis Samaras. One more blogger posted: “Don't become a Tsipras—that's what we'll say to each other for years to come!”

Anastasia, an erstwhile Syriza militant, has relegated the party to “the catalog of traitorous social democratic parties or socialists who are really bourgeois capitalist parties”, including, as she writes, “Holland's Party of Labour, Germany's SPD, Britain's Labour Party, France's Socialist Party, Spain's Socialist Workers Party, Greece's PASOK (now there are two!), Italy's PSI, Australia's Labour Party, Bulgaria's Socialist Party, and Hungary's MSZP.”

The anathema heaped upon Greece's young leader hasn't gone unanswered. In a non-paper issued by his office on July 16th, PM Tsipras berated the 32 deputies who voted against Syriza's

approval of the memorandum the day before. He criticized these “comrades” for going against the “socialist tradition of comradeship,” and complained his government has now lost its majority.

Greece's “Che Guevara” looks today more like Judas Iscariot to many of those who voted him into power on January 25. Instead of interpreting the referendum's massive “no” vote as a green light to stand up to the Troika, Tsipras read it—as did the “enemy,” that is, all pro-austerity parties—as an “order” for Greece not to leave the Eurozone.

With gleeful malice, some people are hoping Tsipras' wife of 20 years leaves him. Betty Batziana, an electrical engineer, is strong-willed, dynamic, militant, and hates shopping. She's apparently gone on record to say she'd leave her mate (they are not officially married) if he crossed any of Syriza's red lines—and he's crossed them all! Given the fact that she took on one of her college professors by suing him for undermining her work on a doctoral thesis, the chances of this happening appear sporting to some.

Is “Sexi Alexi” (so monikered because of his good looks) returning to type? Like so many others in Syriza, he is the scion of a bourgeois family. His father Pavlos was a civil engineer who landed highly lucrative government contracts during the military dictatorship of George Papadopoulos (1967-1973). No such jobs were ever given to anyone suspected of having political views anywhere left of far right. Tsipras' father also donated generous sums to the Church. Some disgruntled Syriza voters have suggested in the media that this might explain why the government hasn't targeted an institution with billions of euros in real estate and other assets, one moreover that has traditionally enjoyed preferential tax treatment.

Maria, a firefighter based in Rafina, a small port town outside of Athens, heaped abuse on all politicians without exception. “Right or left, they're all the same,” she told me. “From now on, I'm only going to trust poor people to lead us! The only possible exceptions are rich people who've suffered for their ideas and spent time in prison!”

Many are describing Syriza's recent capitulation to the Troika as an “anti-austerity Varkiza,” a reference to the Varkiza Treaty of 12 February, 1945. On that day, and against strong protest (even bitter tears) from the party base, the Secretary of the KKE, or Communist Party of Greece, signed with British-supported Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs an agreement that forced the communist-led EAM-ELAS resistance fighters—who controlled

most of Greece—to surrender their weapons and give up the fight.

Tsipras interpreted the choice he had to make as one between sudden death and slow death. He chose the latter. Yet this was a false dilemma, say many. The “troika banksters”, I heard an old man muse angrily at an ATM queue, “wanted us to choose between our lives or our money—and Syriza chose the former.”

The signs were there all along. Blogger Ilias A. mocks Syriza’s friends and voters who “are bitching like cheated spouses.” Indeed, who’s ever heard of a bona fide left-wing government that goes out of its way to stifle a vigilant popular movement? Wasn’t it Syriza, back in 2012, that pulled the people off the streets to serve the logic of legal, respectable opposition? Wasn’t it Syriza that put a damper on the struggle of the fired ERT workers (the country’s state-run television station that was shut down on 11 June, 2013)? And who can forget the trips and meetings Tsipras had in the United States, where he repeatedly stated he was against confrontation with the European powers? His meetings at Lake Come with the wolves of the European economic and political status quo, his secret talks with London funds? The people were neither informed nor consulted, not even Syriza’s organized supporters.

From the get-go, Syriza carried the seed of today’s failure. According to Vangelis, who works in a pizzeria near Omonia Square, “the sperm of the betrayal of our popular struggles was embedded in Syriza’s strategy and its naïve view that they could change Europe at the bargaining table—this Europe that equates itself with the Eurozone and its leaders who represent the oligarchs and bankers against the interests of the people.”

Many on the left are now heaping abuse on Yanis Varoufakis. “The superstar of popular seduction misled us,” wrote Eleni in her blog. “The former minister of finance hadn’t shown up for as little as ten minutes at any demonstration. Does this surprise anyone? Whom do Tsipras, Varoufakis, Stathakis, Tsakalotos or Papadimoulis express, after all—the factory workers of Piraeus who earn 600 euros a month?”

Many fear that the backflip of this “first time left” government will become the tombstone of the Greek people. In the past few weeks I’ve repeatedly been awed and amazed at how these momentous times have brought powerful words and phrases to the lips of people. Myrto, a single mother of two who never graduated from high-school, works the night shift at a bread factory on Marathon Avenue outside Athens. She bowled me over the other day with this thunderbolt: “We’re all every word of this country’s epitaph.”

The irony in this story is that most of the pro-austerity crowd, people who voted “yes” in the referendum, are now backing the government. Not so long ago these folks were full of fire and brimstone about the “communist-Bolshevik” threat. Niki, a young lawyer, said she’s “very impressed” with Alexis Tsipras. While she feared the prime minister would put his party above his country, he did the opposite—“and that takes guts!” she added.

Stratis, an unemployed construction worker, reminded me of something Lenin once said: “When your enemy praises you, stop and look back and see what you’ve done wrong!” He was referring to Alexis Tsipras.

Nasty tongues joke that our young PM may soon become the

head of right-wing New Democracy party! Panos, a naval architect, quipped in an email that for the first time in history, Tsipras may become the head of two parties simultaneously, Syriza and New Democracy! Manolis, a young electrician whose son plays football with my ten-year-old, let me in on his “formula” for determining which Syriza deputies have sold out to the system. It is the way the mass media treat them, he disclosed. “After this new Memorandum, we’ll soon know who’s the worst Syriza deputy of all—it’ll be he or she who appears all day long on the television channels of the oligarchs.”

Some have expressed the hope that Syriza’s capitulation may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory for Germany and the troika. They are sanguine that this “agreement” has torn the veil from Germany, exposing the European elites (and their Greek collaborators) for what they truly are: vicious egotistical cynics who fought tooth and nail against Greece’s left-wing government, and finally annihilated it by transforming it. “Europe is changing,” Antonis, a pro-Euro taxi-driver, told me. “It would be a shame if we were outside the union the day after.” Rather impenetrably, he added, “Greece shouldn’t have entered the euro, but we should never leave the euro either.”

There were two strategies Syriza could have followed. One was to try and change Europe from within. The other: save Greece via a well-formulated Plan B, or Grexit. It did neither. By Varoufakis’ own admission, Athens made no serious effort to enlist the support of sympathetic masses in Europe, not even those of Spanish populist party Podemos. On the other hand, Podemos’s pony-tailed leader and founder, Pablo Iglesias Turrión, recently came out with support for Syriza’s capitulation to the Troika as “realistic.” His party’s popularity immediately dropped in the polls. Who needs losers? As Katerina, a cashier at a local Lidl supermarket, told me: “Those Spaniards seem to be made of the same paste as our ‘leftists’—they see the dilemma through the same glasses. It’s either servile submission to the Troika or exit from the Eurozone!”

Seventy-six year-old Stelios, a widower whose pension is so small he makes ends meet at soup kitchens, volunteered his views to me. “Shame on Syriza,” he sputtered animatedly. “They had no Plan B—and went to war unprepared. The government never enlisted us in the fight. It never prepared the people for the tough battles. If this isn’t criminal incompetence, I don’t know what is!”



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