

Syriza's austerity policies expose the reactionary role of France's NPA

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The imposition of deep austerity policies by the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government in Greece exposes the reactionary role of all the petty-bourgeois groups that have promoted Syriza as a radical model for left-wing politics. Groups like France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and its international affiliates bear political responsibility for the attacks Syriza is now launching against the Greek workers.

Less than half a year since coming to power, Syriza has imposed vast new social cuts and privatizations that will devastate Greece’s impoverished working class. Trampling its election pledges to end European Union (EU) austerity and the landslide “no” vote in the July 5 referendum, Syriza accepted a broad austerity package dictated by Berlin and the EU on July 13. It has since begun ramming the package through the Greek parliament.

The Syriza government is a critical experience of the international working class on the role of petty-bourgeois parties such as Syriza, the NPA, and the NPA’s international allies in the Pabloite United Secretariat (USec). The vast chasm separating their cynical pro-capitalist politics from the working class has been comprehensively exposed. It is the sharpest possible warning that workers seeking to oppose austerity must organize their struggles independently of and against these pseudo-left parties.

Ever since Syriza emerged as the main electoral beneficiary of the discrediting of the social-democratic Pasok party, the Pabloites enthusiastically presented Syriza as the great hope and model for the European left. In May 2012, the Executive Bureau (EB) of the USec issued a statement hailing Syriza as a steadfast opponent of the “troika” of Greece’s creditors—the EU, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

The USec called for “the coming together of all the forces fighting austerity in Greece—Syriza, Antarsya, the KKE [Greek Communist Party], the unions, and the other social movements—around an emergency plan. ... Confronted by the policy imposed by the Troika, the Greek radical Left and in particular Syriza, which today occupies a central place in the Greek political situation, defends a 5-point emergency plan.” These points were “abolition of the memoranda, of all measures of austerity,” “nationalization of the banks,” “a moratorium on payment of debt,” “abolition of immunity of ministers from prosecution,” and “modification of the electoral law.”

In 2014, Alan Thornett, of the USec’s Socialist Resistance group in Britain, predicted that Syriza, once in power, would find itself leading revolutionary struggles. He wrote that in a crisis, “such a party, seeking to defend the interests of the working class, with mass support on the ground, and with demands which are unacceptable to the ruling elites, can trigger a course of events which can develop into a challenge to capitalism itself.”

He attacked a Marxist analysis of Syriza—that as a pro-capitalist party rooted in sections of the Greek bourgeoisie and affluent middle class, it would prove hostile the working class when it took power. He wrote,

“Refusal to support Syriza is often justified on the basis that Syriza is left social democratic (or left reformist) in character ... Such a left reformist party, it is argued, can never open up a development beyond capitalism since the closer reformism gets to power the more it will adapt to the capitalist agenda.”

Thornett summarily dismissed this argument as an obstacle to the development he aimed to make by supporting Syriza: “I don’t think, however, that putting a label of left reformism on Syriza is a useful way of approaching this.”

The USec’s promises that Syriza would lead a popular mobilization were lies, and its anti-Marxist perspective of electing a Syriza government proved to be a trap for the working class. Once in power, Syriza repudiated every one of the demands in the USec’s “emergency program.”

After its election, Syriza predictably did nothing to mobilize the working class in Greece or across Europe. Rather, it entered into long talks with the EU, extended the EU austerity Memorandum, pledged to honor Greece’s debt, and began looting billions of euros from Greek local authorities to repay the country’s creditors. When these funds ran out at the end of June, it had no alternatives. Determined to safeguard the wealth of the Greek ruling elites, based on the strong euro currency and the institutions of the EU, Syriza prepared a total capitulation to the EU’s austerity demands.

These policies did not noticeably dim the NPA’s enthusiasm for Syriza. When Tsipras called his July 5 referendum on austerity, as talks broke down with the EU over austerity measures, the NPA hailed the referendum call as the beginning of an unstoppable shift to the left by Syriza. It wrote, “What will the Tsipras government do? There is no possible agreement with the troika. There is no other solution besides a confrontation with it and the Greek bourgeoisie to impose the cancellation of the debt, the nationalization of the banks, the control and seizure of the banks.”

In fact, as the NPA wrote these lines, Syriza was planning its total capitulation to the EU diktat and to the Greek bourgeoisie. Each of the NPA’s predictions on the “radical” policies Syriza was supposedly going to carry out proved totally false. Far from struggling against the troika’s attempts to strangle it, Syriza proved to be a tool of the troika in Greece.

The referendum call was, as the WSWs wrote at the time, “a reactionary fraud designed to lend a veneer of democratic legitimacy to the looting of Greece by the banks.” Press accounts of the discussion within Syriza later confirmed that Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, while he called for a “no” vote, hoped that EU threats to expel Greece from the euro would frighten voters into a “yes” vote. He planned then to step down and hand over power to a pro-EU government.

The working class in Greece did not follow Tsipras’ plan, however, defying the EU and the Greek media and voting “no” by 61 percent, in a vote sharply polarized along class lines. Tsipras found no other solution than to trample the “no” vote he had in fact called for. After another week

of talks with the EU, he accepted a program of deep pension cuts, regressive VAT (sales tax) increases, privatizations, and subsidy cuts dictated by Berlin in order to keep Greece in the euro.

The NPA and its USec affiliates reacted by doing everything they could to block the growth of opposition to Syriza's reactionary deal, and keep this opposition bottled up behind impotent appeals to one or another faction of Syriza.

A. Sartzekis, a member of the OKDE group affiliated to the NPA in Greece, pompously called for "resolute and united action" by the same list of unions and political parties the USec promoted prior to Syriza's election in 2012. He wrote, "In Greece itself, keep up the mobilizations—on Friday, thousands attended protests before the parliament called by Antarsya [the political alliance that includes OKDE], of anarcho-syndicalists, of PAME (the Greek Communist Party's trade union faction), and the left of Syriza."

The NPA also published an extended interview with an OKDE member named Fani, who defended Tsipras. She said, "First of all, I would like to clarify one point: I do not think one can say that Tsipras and his government betrayed the Greek people and the working class. From the beginning, he selected a strategy of class collaboration and managing the capitalist system from within the institutions. His current choices are the consequences of the contradictions of reformism."

This cynical remark only begs the question. If the USec knew that Syriza would attack the working class because of its pro-capitalist, class-collaborationist perspective, why did it for years promote Syriza as a great hope, insist that Syriza's opposition to revolution had no practical significance, and attack those who warned that Syriza would betray any hopes placed in it by the masses?

The mixture of bad faith, self-delusion, and outright stupidity that drove the political line of the NPA and the USec on the crisis of the Syriza government, were rooted in definite class interests hostile to the proletariat. The reactionary petty-bourgeois milieu of anti-globalization academics, trade union executives, up-and-coming student activists, and careerist parliamentarians from which Syriza emerges feared the implications of a struggle against the EU—not least of which would be the impact of a possible Greek exit from the euro on the valuation of their stock portfolios.

Similarly, the corresponding social layers represented by the NPA in France and the USec organizations elsewhere saw in Syriza the promise of realizing a cherished dream: taking office and running the capitalist state. They had no intention of letting an eruption of class struggle disturb the financial arrangements and EU bank bailouts through which their own wealth had been preserved after the 2008 economic crisis. They assumed that some sort of deal could be worked out within the context of the EU.

What has emerged instead is the profound and intractable character of the crisis of European capitalism, and the conflict between finance capital and the working class. The EU has proven to be a dictatorial tool of the banks, trampling public opinion to impose an economically irrational, continent-wide austerity diktat that, as even the financial press admits, saddles Greece with an unviable debt burden that will destroy its economy. As for the parties that claimed they would push European capitalism onto a more viable path, like Syriza or the USec, they proved bankrupt.

The lesson that emerges from every aspect of the experience of the Syriza government is that no viable opposition to austerity is possible without a revolutionary mobilization of the working class against the EU and European capitalism. The experience has confirmed the Trotskyist perspective for a revolutionary struggle by the working class for socialism, by exposing the bankruptcy of the petty-bourgeois conceptions of the NPA.

As France's Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) dissolved itself to form the NPA on the basis of explicit opposition to Trotskyism in 2009,

it was articulating theoretical and political conceptions that underlay the Syriza government.

At the time, the WSWs assessed the LCR's decision to re-create itself as the NPA as follows: "To be part of the bourgeoisie's realignment of the left, the LCR must make clear they are breaking whatever tenuous association they had with revolutionary politics. To the extent that the LCR is publicly identified with Trotskyism, this is an obstacle to the sharp swing to the right that the LCR anticipates it will carry out in collaboration with the trade unions, the Socialist Party, and other forces of the French political establishment. The LCR's real target in liquidating itself is, in fact, Trotsky's political heritage: an insistence on the complete political independence of the working class, revolutionary internationalism, and an irreconcilable opposition to collaboration with the bourgeois state, the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies, and all brands of bourgeois nationalism and petty-bourgeois radicalism."

The NPA's support for the Syriza government has entirely vindicated the WSWs' analysis of the reactionary implications of the NPA's politics and its hostility to a politically independent struggle for socialism by the working class. Nor was the NPA's support for Syriza an accidental element of its political trajectory. Rather, it was organically rooted in conceptions the NPA developed as it rejected the Trotskyist perspective of establishing the United Socialist States of Europe.

The NPA explicitly rejected the demand for the United Socialist States of Europe at its founding congress. It replaced it with the vague conception of a "Europe of the workers and peoples" which, as the NPA's documents soon made clear, involved an adaptation to the EU and the banks. In a 2009 article, "An Anti-capitalist Alternative for Europe," the NPA's François Sabado advanced a perspective of pressuring the EU to shift financial policy, with bigger bank bailouts and quantitative easing money-printing programs, in response to the economic crisis.

Favorably citing the Obama administration's 2009 stimulus package of 5 percent of US Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Sabado wrote, "What should we say of European stimulus plans? They are at best undersized: 1.3 percent of GDP in the UK, 1 percent in France, 0.8 percent in Germany, 0.1 percent in Italy."

He added, "Europe could constitute the functional setting for a Keynesian bailout. However, the politics of the European Union clearly illustrate the incapacity of the ruling classes to carry out such a turn." He lamented that the ruling classes "do not intend to impose new financial and accounting standards that could effectively control the availability of credit to restart economic activity," however, and suggested the possibility that "social struggles" could force a shift in policy.

This peculiar perspective of mobilizing "social struggles" for better accounting standards was not aimed at the working class. Both the Obama administration's bailout and its smaller European counterparts involved deep attacks on the working class, from whom the banks tried to claw back the money being used to bail them out. Rather, it was meant as a perspective for an unstable type of capitalist regime that the NPA was proposing to build, which it cynically hid under the term "workers government."

The NPA used this term not in the Marxist sense of a government emerging from the conquest of state power by the working class and pursuing socialist policies. Rather, the "workers government" was an entity the NPA was seeking to create, a bourgeois government that would function in an unspecified but abnormal manner.

In an article titled "Elements of Revolutionary Strategy," Sabado wrote: "The workers government is a transitional governmental formula, in a situation of crisis where the institutions of the old state apparatus are not yet destroyed. It is not yet the power of popular organs or the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' but it is no longer the normal functioning of bourgeois institutions....It is a possible intermediate government, on the road to the conquest of power by the workers."

The NPA's anti-Trotskyist perspectives were put to the test with the Syriza government, a bourgeois government of deep crisis that came to power working within the context of the EU to impel a shift in financial policy. This perspective suffered a historic shipwreck. Not only did Syriza fail to impel a shift in EU financial policy, but it turned out not to offer a road towards the conquest of power by the working class, but only a dead end of deeper austerity and social oppression. The working class can escape this dead end only by mobilizing itself in revolutionary struggle against both Syriza and the EU.



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