

A week before election, Greek conservatives neck and neck with Syriza

Alex Lantier**14 September 2015**

A week before a snap election set for September 20 by former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras when he resigned last month, the conservative New Democracy (ND) is rising in the polls. An MRB poll showed Tsipras' Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) now leading ND by only 25.9 percent to 25.5 percent. Three other polls showed a spread of less than 1 percent between Syriza and ND.

What is being played out in Greece are the initial political consequences of Syriza's abject betrayal of its electoral pledges to end the austerity policies imposed by the European Union. Nine months ago, in January, Syriza was swept into power after a discredited, two-year-old ND government faced a rising tide of student protests and strikes. Balking at the prospect of imposing yet another EU austerity package in the face of mass opposition, ND had called new elections instead.

Syriza's election victory in January, and the landslide "no" vote against EU austerity in the July 5 referendum, seemed to deal blows to ND, a hated tool of finance capital descended from supporters of the CIA-backed Greek military junta of 1967-1974. After the referendum, former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras felt compelled to step down as ND leader.

At each step, however, Syriza's anti-worker policies, reflecting support for the EU in its affluent middle class social base, gave ND an opening to regroup. First, Syriza signed an agreement to extend existing EU austerity memoranda in February. Then, on July 13, it repudiated the result of the July 5 referendum and imposed an unprecedented multi-billion-euro EU austerity bailout dictated by Berlin.

After Tsipras resigned on August 27, the media speculated that he called the snap election because he was still popular compared to ND. He could, it was

argued, call early elections as a maneuver, before his austerity measures began to hit the public and undermine his popularity, and hope to strengthen his majority in parliament before confronting popular opposition to the bailout.

As voters have contemplated the prospect of deep pension cuts, sales tax increases and other social attacks imposed by a so-called "radical left" government, however, Syriza has begun hemorrhaging support. The overwhelming opposition to austerity in the working class finds no expression in these elections or in any section of the Greek political establishment. One manifestation of this impasse for the working class is the electoral revival of the ND.

With both Syriza and ND running campaigns that advocate the EU austerity package, there is little to distinguish between the two parties. Syriza's criticisms of ND's reactionary record of imposing EU austerity lack any credibility since it imposed an even more savage bailout.

"New Democracy is with [German Finance Minister] Mr. Schäuble's Europe. We are with the forces that desire a social shift and the disengagement from the neo-liberal doctrines," Tsipras declared yesterday in *Ethnos*.

Not only is Tsipras "with Mr. Schäuble's Europe," he has no more desire than ND to see a "social shift" that favors the working class or a repudiation of free market policies. He is running an explicitly pro-austerity, pro-EU campaign. A week ago, he said that if Syriza were reelected, it would comply with the EU austerity package it had signed, calling this "the only way" to emerge from the crisis.

In fact, reports are emerging from economists of all stripes that the package will only provoke a further, devastating economic collapse. Particularly in a country

where most youth are unemployed and many families live solely on retirees' pension payments, the latest pension cuts will force masses of people into penury. With millions of Greeks living in hunger and Greece's homeless population having surged over the last five years of austerity, there is no question that Tsipras' package will lead to the deaths of considerable numbers of people.

The bankruptcy of the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the Popular Unity split-off from Syriza led by Panagiotis Lafazanis is also fueling ND's rise. This became clear in a seven-candidate debate between Tsipras, New Democracy's Meimarakis, Stavros Theodorakis of the pro-EU The River party, Fofi Gennimata of Pasok, Panos Kammenos of the far-right Independent Greeks, Popular Unity's Lafazanis and KKE leader Dimitris Koutsoumbas.

Lafazanis claimed that his party was "honest" because it insisted on maintaining Syriza's original stated opposition to EU austerity. He then joked about stealing funds from the Greek mint to pay for the state's expenses, claiming that Greece could avoid austerity by returning to a national currency.

Lafazanis is no less implicated than Tsipras himself in Syriza's austerity measures. Lafazanis and his faction of Syriza worked to secure passage of Tsipras' austerity package, refusing to call a vote on it in Syriza's Central Committee. His faction left Syriza only when it became clear that Tsipras wanted to block their re-election to the Greek parliament.

Koutsoumbas tried to capitalize on this, criticizing Lafazanis and Popular Unity for being Tsipras' allies before splitting with Syriza. However, Koutsoumbas then proceeded to hail Manolis Glezos, a long-standing Syriza member who has joined Popular Unity, and launched a nationalist tirade warning of "jihadis" and accusing Lafazanis of being a "Russia-lover."

ND clearly emerged strengthened from this spectacle. Last week, Meimarakis was still trying to cajole voters into voting for him by insisting that if he won, he would step aside and offer the prime minister's job to someone else—a prominent personality who was not a professional politician. On Saturday, however, he for the first time suggested that he would actually try to lead a government in which ND would be the main faction.

"Clearly, I will be prime minister and clearly will

address other forces if Tsipras does not want to," he said, chiding Tsipras for not agreeing to his proposal to form an ND-Syriza government. He asked Tsipras if "he wants to stay outside and start stone-throwing," adding, "Do we want to go forward or back? With cooperation or arrogance? With truth or lies?"

These platitudes are enough to score points, however, under conditions where Syriza's promises have been exposed as lies and no alternative on the left is visible to masses of people.

One ND official told the *Financial Times* of London that Meimarakis, previously seen as a "second-tier party hack," stunned ND itself by emerging as "our best weapon against Tsipras."

Whoever emerges as the victor in the September 20 election will confront the working class as a bitter enemy. The critical political issue will be the independent political mobilization of the working class against this bankers' government, whether it is led by Syriza or ND.



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