

European allies of Syriza issue a reactionary “Plan B in Europe”

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This weekend, at the Fête de L’Humanité festival of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) in Paris, a coalition of political allies of Syriza issued a statement addressing the political situation since the dissolution of the Syriza-led government in Greece. The statement, titled “Plan B in Europe,” is a cynical exercise in political damage control.

The signatories are former German Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine of the German Left Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of France’s Left Front, former Italian Deputy Finance Minister and Democratic Party member Stefano Fassina, and two people who until a few weeks ago were in Syriza: former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis and Zoe Konstantopoulou, president of the Greek parliament.

These forces are compelled to issue a “Plan B” because their “Plan A,” centered on the coming to power of former Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’ Syriza-led government, has suffered political shipwreck. They all hailed Syriza’s election, but Syriza has now imposed a new series of harsh European Union austerity measures dictated by Berlin. Aware of growing social anger in the working class, these reactionary operators are desperate to cover up Syriza’s record and prevent workers from drawing any conclusions from its political crimes.

They begin: “On July 13, the democratically elected Greek government of Alexis Tsipras was brought to its knees by the European Union. The ‘agreement’ of July 13 is, in fact, a coup d’état. It was obtained by having the European Central Bank close down the Greek banks and threaten to never allow them to open up again until the Greek government accepted a new version of a failed program.”

The claim that a coup forced Tsipras to implement EU austerity demands is a flat-out lie. Neither the Greek military nor any other army lifted a finger against Tsipras, nor did the army brass have any reason to do so. Despite the brutal character of the EU intervention, Tsipras insisted he wanted to maintain Greece’s ties with the EU. He agreed to and imposed savage EU austerity policies, trampling on two votes by the Greek people—his election on January 25 on an anti-austerity platform, and the landslide “no” vote against austerity in the July 5 referendum.

Particularly after the latter vote, which, despite desperate conditions caused by the closure of Greek banks, defied EU threats and a massive pro-“yes” campaign in the media, no one could claim that Greek workers were not ready for a fight. Predictably, however, the EU insisted on austerity, threatening to expel Greece from the euro zone if it did not surrender.

In line with the Greek bourgeoisie and sections of the affluent middle class represented by Syriza, who were desperate to keep the

high-valued euro currency and their ties to NATO, Tsipras surrendered, accepting the harshest EU austerity package imposed thus far.

Despite this bitter lesson on the EU’s role as an outright dictatorship of the banks, the “Plan B” statement loyally defends the EU throughout. Its preferred solution, labeled “Plan A,” is that advanced by Syriza: to try to rally support for tinkering with the EU’s legal and financial foundations. The authors write, “This is our Plan A: we shall work in each of our countries, and all together throughout Europe, towards a complete renegotiation of the European Treaties.”

Amid rising popular opposition and after the experience of the Syriza government, however, the statement’s signatories sense that they cannot simply continue to advance Syriza’s line. Instead, they put on a populist guise, acknowledging the role of the euro as a “tool of economic and governmental dominance in Europe by a European oligarchy,” and advocate a “Plan B” as the alternative that could have saved Syriza.

They write, “The majority of governments representing Europe’s oligarchy, and hiding behind Berlin and Frankfurt, also have a Plan A: not to yield to the European people’s demand for democracy, and to use brutality to end their resistance. We’ve seen this in Greece last July. Why did they manage to strangle Greece’s democratically elected government? Because they also had a plan B: to eject Greece from the euro zone in the worst conditions possible, by destroying its banking system and putting to death its economy. Facing this blackmail, we also need a plan B of our own...”

As one would expect from this cabal of former finance ministers and parliamentarians, their “Plan B” is not a turn to mobilizing the opposition to austerity in the working class across Europe. Rather, they have a plan of action for Europe’s central bankers and financial officials. Asserting that Europeans need “a monetary system that works with them, not at their expense,” they propose a controlled dissolution of the euro into national currencies within the framework of the EU.

They write, “Our Plan A for a democratic Europe, backed with a Plan B which shows the powers-that-be that they cannot terrorize us into submission, is inclusive and aims at appealing to the majority of Europeans. This demands a high level of preparation. Debate will strengthen its technical elements. Many ideas are already on the table: the introduction of parallel payment systems, parallel currencies, digitization of euro transactions, community-based exchange systems, euro exit, and transformation of the euro into a common currency.”

One central political fraud underlies this “Plan B” proposal: it tries to locate the cause of Syriza’s surrender to EU austerity not in Syriza’s class character and program, but in its bargaining tactics.

Syriza surrendered to austerity, its argument goes, because when faced with the EU's "Plan B" to throw Greece out of the euro, Syriza did not manage to think up a "Plan B" that would have allowed it to leave the euro.

This is another ridiculous lie. Yanis Varoufakis, one of the signatories of the "Plan B" statement, has said that as the Syriza government's finance minister he prepared a plan for a Greek exit from the euro. The Greek ruling class wanted to keep the euro and it wanted to implement austerity, however, so Tsipras ignored Varoufakis' "Plan B" and capitulated to the EU.

Syriza's embrace of EU austerity is not due to the brutality of EU negotiating tactics. It is rooted in the intractable crisis of European and world capitalism and the interests of the ruling class in Greece and internationally. As in Italy and France, Greek capitalism suffers from a lack of competitiveness on global markets and has relied on an unprecedented build-up of debt. To reestablish its competitiveness and manage its debt, the ruling class in Greece—along with its counterparts across Europe—intends to slash workers' wages and social conditions.

The central lesson of the Syriza government is that the working class cannot repel such offensives by electing one or another capitalist government. Stopping these attacks requires the mobilization of the working class in a political struggle against the EU aimed at the taking of power on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program for the United Socialist States of Europe.

The alternative proposed by the signatories of the "Plan B" statement is not a way forward, but a new guise for continuing the attacks on the working class through a turn to the right. Instead of cutting wages and social spending in a euro-denominated financial system, they propose to cut the real value of workers' wages by reintroducing cheaper national currencies.

This is part of a broader strategy, consciously pursued by the different parties involved in the "Plan B" statement, of dividing the European working class along national lines. Fearing a coalescing of struggles against austerity across Europe around opposition to the persecution of Greece, they set out to foment racial hatreds and resentments to block a common movement of the working class.

Lafontaine bluntly laid out this strategy two years ago as the right-wing, anti-euro Alternative for Germany (AfD) party was forming in Germany. "Wages and social expenditure have grown too much in Southern Europe," Lafontaine arrogantly wrote. "To again achieve an approximately balanced competitiveness, countries like Greece, Portugal and Spain [must become] 20 to 30 percent less expensive, and Germany 20 percent more expensive, compared with the average of the EU countries."

In order to accomplish this, he proposed to reintroduce parallel national currencies "alongside the euro," in order "to make controlled devaluations and controlled revaluations by means of an exchange rate underpinned by the EU possible again."

This modest proposal to cut hundreds of millions of workers' wages by 20 percent or more in one blow testifies to the reactionary character of the "Plan B" policy. It underscores that Syriza's attacks on the working class in Greece were not a miscalculation or the product of an unavoidable surrender to the EU. Rather, they are rooted in the class interests represented by the anti-worker, pro-capitalist charlatans who signed the "Plan B" statement.

Lafontaine's reactionary proposal is echoed in the program of Popular Unity, a nationalist split-off from Syriza that includes Zoe Konstantopoulou, one of the "Plan B" signatories.

Popular Unity's program asserts: "Attainment of monetary

sovereignty, with de-linkage of the Bank of Greece from the ECB [European Central Bank], and its operation with governmental, public, and social accountability and with issuance of a national currency, will provide us with the necessary liquidity in the economy, without the onerous burden of the loan agreements. It will be of great assistance in strengthening exports, limiting and gradually substituting local products for imports, invigorating the country's productive base and tourist inflow."

That is, Popular Unity hopes that by paying workers in a cheap currency and slashing their purchasing power, they could limit imports and transform Greece into a cheap-labor export platform along the lines of China.

The reactionary character of such plans is further underscored by the recent initiative, widely reported in France, by Jacques Sapir, an economist close to the French Left Front. He proposed a French exit from the euro and a 25 percent devaluation of the French currency, to be carried out by an alliance including the Left Front of Mélenchon and the PCF and the neo-fascist National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen.

"When one makes one's priority the dismantling of the euro zone, a strategy of broad union, including with right-wing forces, is not only logical but necessary," Sapir wrote. He proposed the formation of a "National Liberation Front" stretching from the Left Front to former Socialist Party minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, right-wing nationalist Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, and the FN.

Sapir dismissed objections that, since the FN is currently the biggest vote-getter in his proposed alliance, he was advocating the coming to power of a neo-fascist-led government in France. He cynically wrote: "We must understand very clearly that now is not the time for sectarianism and taboos pronounced from one or another side. The question of political virginity, which seems to obsess left-wing people, is like biological virginity in that it is only posed once."

Such deeply reactionary proposals are a warning to the working class in Europe and internationally. Syriza's imposition of EU austerity, while in a coalition government with the far-right Independent Greeks (Anel) party, was not an aberration. Rather, it is the end result of the bankruptcy of the entire capitalist political establishment in Europe, including anti-worker parties such as Syriza, the Left Party, and the Left Front, that are marketed as "left" only in order to disorient public opinion.



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