

Greek PM Tsipras promotes nationalism, austerity at Southern European conference

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The “Summit of Southern Europe” hosted today by Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Athens, and presented yesterday in a front-page interview of Tsipras in *Le Monde*, is a cynical fraud. The Greek, Cypriot, Maltese, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian officials attending—including French President François Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi—all speak for governments discredited by their reactionary austerity measures.

Tsipras is trying to rally support for all these regimes, including his own, and give them a new face with carefully calculated, demagogic criticisms of Berlin. Last year, Tsipras’ own Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government trampled repeated popular votes in Greece against austerity and worked out a deal with Paris and Berlin to impose a new austerity package. Now, as he imposes these attacks, he is trying to divert mounting social anger along nationalist lines, attacking Germany while simultaneously asking Berlin for financial concessions.

“Recovery is slow, particularly because we are not getting the necessary generosity from our partners on debt relief. If they refuse to advance on this issue, it will be hard for my country to see growth,” Tsipras complained. Tsipras identified Berlin as the key obstacle to his agenda. Beyond debt relief, he called for loosening EU limits on budget deficits, a policy strongly opposed by Berlin, and for vaguely-defined “pro-growth” policies.

“We must collectively decide if we are a European Union or a German Europe. We need a strong, democratic, European Germany, rather than a Germany that acts like a savings bank with excessive budget surpluses,” he told *Le Monde*.

The timing of Tsipras’ summit makes clear the calculations underlying his criticisms of Berlin. This

week, Greek pensioners felt the brunt of Syriza’s cuts of up to 50 percent to supplementary pension schemes. Retired public sector workers, bank tellers and shipping and transport workers were hit, as well as retirees from upper middle class layers from which Syriza’s own social base is drawn. As Syriza announced more privatizations of natural gas, electricity and highway authorities, pensioners protested outside the Labor Ministry.

Tsipras’ approval rating plunged below 10 percent in a University of Macedonia poll, to the lowest numbers recorded by a Greek government in decades. As a result, *Greek Reporter* noted: “[I]n view of his sliding popularity, Tsipras is putting emphasis on improving his image domestically.”

Tsipras turned down an invitation to Berlin for talks, in the run-up to next week’s EU summit in Bratislava, and instead organized a counter-summit including the euro zone’s second and third largest economies, France and Italy.

Tsipras’ attacks on Berlin are empty demagogy, however. While they incite anger against Germany, they do not signify any shift away from the austerity policies also demanded by the ruling class in Greece, France and Italy—i.e., by raising wages or launching state programs to create the tens of millions of jobs needed to end mass unemployment in Europe. Despite his noisy attacks on Berlin, Tsipras was careful to make clear to *Le Monde* that he still supports EU austerity.

“We are still obligated to apply a strict policy of budgetary adjustment, but things are getting better,” he blandly declared in response to a question about Greece’s shattered, stagnant economy.

Tsipras defended the reactionary record of his government, which consists of repeated betrayals of his election promises to the Greek people to end austerity.

“When our country was put with its back to the wall, we had to make a painful compromise, which we submitted to our people, who voted for us again,” he told *Le Monde*. “But despite everything, we still have all the remaining room for maneuver to introduce measures of a social character.”

Syriza’s record is not one of enlightened social policy, but treachery and deceit. Before its election, it hoped to manipulate antagonisms between the major powers to obtain limited concessions from the EU, primarily using France and Italy to push for a “pro-growth” policy against Germany. This strategy collapsed, however. Failing to obtain any concessions, Syriza moved rapidly to attack the working class, in the interests of finance capital and Syriza’s own privileged middle-class social base, and block an international struggle of European workers against EU austerity.

Tsipras was elected in January 2015 based on promises to scrap the EU austerity Memorandum—promises that he promptly tore up, agreeing a few weeks later to keep the Memorandum. Then, in July 2015, when the EU threatened to cut off the bailout of Greece, Tsipras organized a referendum on EU austerity, hoping to lose and hand over power to a right-wing government. When he obtained a landslide 61 percent “no” vote against EU austerity, he promptly trampled it, agreeing to billions in new social cuts in talks with Berlin and Paris.

At no point did Syriza appeal for support in the European working class against EU austerity, even as social anger mounted in Germany, France, Italy and across the EU. It defended the EU and the euro. This reflected the interests of the Greek ruling class and layers of the affluent middle class, who feared the collapse of their wealth if their assets were shifted from euros into a devalued Greek national currency, and overwhelmingly voted “yes” in the July 2015 referendum.

Despite rising tensions among EU countries, the fundamental strategy of Greece’s propertied classes was to pursue an alliance with the EU bourgeoisie against the workers. Frequent clashes between Berlin and Athens, while they settled various financial conflicts to Berlin’s advantage, were subordinated to the common goal of saving the EU, the euro and the political framework of EU austerity.

They served another key purpose, namely, promoting

the lie that Syriza was fighting for the Greek people at the EU. In fact, Tsipras offered no meaningful resistance. His role resembled that of a Nazi agent in the Resistance in Occupied Greece during World War II: periodically asking his German overlords to hit him, so that other Resistance fighters would believe that he was with them, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

These policies have produced a disaster, however, as Tsipras himself all but admitted to *Le Monde*. With Britain’s exit from the EU, a vast banking crisis shaking Italy and millions of refugees fleeing to Europe from imperialist wars in the Middle East and Africa, the EU is disintegrating.

“Europe is threatened with decomposition, with more referendums rejecting the EU and more anti-European governments in its midst,” Tsipras said, adding: “I think continuing, after Brexit, to act as if nothing had changed would be a tragic error. Europe is deep in crisis, it is sleepwalking towards a cliff. We must sound the alarm.”

Tsipras also endorsed the EU’s reactionary deal with Turkey to block the flow of refugees from Syria and Iraq to Europe, pledging “all possible efforts to preserve it despite the difficulties.”

Tsipras, who offers no perspective but attempting to preserve EU as Fortress Europe, is politically bankrupt. His program of appealing to Hollande and Renzi for support against Berlin within the EU, while it produces nothing but austerity and wars for the workers, plays a significant role in stoking the increasingly toxic divisions inside the Europe which Tsipras claims to oppose.



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