Greece: Syriza touts for investors and fêtes Macron

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In Greece, the parliamentary summer break is over, and in the weeks and months ahead, a new round of cuts will begin, which will inevitably lead to fierce class battles.

On Monday, representatives of the troika—European Commission, European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund—returned to the country to check on the progress of the government's austerity measures.

"Tsipras faces a hot autumn," was the headline of a leading German business daily *Handelsblatt* in its August weekend edition. The government of the pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), under Prime Minister Tsipras, has been tasked to carry through a further 113 reforms and austerity measures by August 2018, which were agreed with the country's international creditors. Only then will Greece be provided with the financial means it needs to pay its debts.

Tsipras has promised to push through 90 different cuts by the end of the year. Further social cuts, limitations on the right to strike, stricter controls on hiring public sector workers and the implementation of a series of privatizations, represent just a few of the attacks that the working class will face.

Tsipras is preparing for his "hot autumn" and seeking solidarity from the European and international bourgeoisie. Last weekend, he used the annual trade fair in Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city, to tout Greece as a haven for foreign capital and a reliable partner for the geo-political interests of the great powers. The fair attracts entrepreneurs and bankers from all over the world; this time there were more than in previous years, mainly from the host country, China.

Thousands of demonstrators gathered in Thessaloniki for rallies and protests against the business summit, which was protected by about 4,000 officers from special police units.

In his opening speech, Tsipras kowtowed before the international financial and business elite. No one could deny the enormous "interest from investors in our country," he enthused. "Greece's image" had fundamentally changed in recent years, "for the positive." He then forecast a growth in Gross Domestic Product of almost 2 percent for 2017.

Based on current economic data from the Greek statistics authority (Elsat), the prime minister calculated that Syriza had transformed the country into an economic paradise for foreign investors, and resorted to a clumsy play on words, declaring that the country had gone from "Grexit" to "Grinvest."

This had only been possible, he said, through the "winning back" of international recognition and Greece's geo-political position. These important steps included the recent visit by French President Emmanuel Macron, the visit of former US President Barack Obama and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as his own visits to China. In this way, Greece had once more become a "strategic partner" for significant international economic powers.

Tsipras went on to boast, "Even if some still condemn us as enemies of business, we have developed very concrete initiatives and carried these through on the way to improving the business climate." For example, 11,000 businesses had benefited from a simplification of licensing procedures; the financial sector had also made a positive development, and the largest agreement so far had been concluded with the European Investment Bank, in order to improve Greece's liquidity. With French support, Greece was planning the establishment of its own development bank.

In the second part of his speech, Tsipras claimed that economic growth would also benefit the majority of the population. He attempted to substantiate this open lie by listing the social measures introduced by Syriza, including the creation of new jobs, the improvement of access to health care and the reforms in education. However, given the massive social attacks that Syriza has carried out—contrary to its own election promises—the measures listed are nothing more than crumbs, handed out to try and prevent a social explosion, or that will prove, on closer inspection, to be nothing but illusions.

For example, according to Savvas Rombilis, Scientific Director of the Institute for Work of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), and honorary professor at Pantheon University in Athens, just over half of those hired in 2016 now work part-time. Where Elsat talks of a fall in unemployment to 21.5 percent, actual unemployment stands at about 31.5 percent, according to a study by the European Central Bank.

In continuing his austerity measures, Tsipras is relying on the close collaboration of the other European governments. A week ago, he received a visit from French President Macron, who was accompanied to Athens by a phalange of French business leaders and bankers. Macron praised Tsipras and his "reforms" to the skies and used the Athens trip to seek support for his own attacks on French workers' rights.

The Syriza leader, who three years ago posed as the voice of opposition, rolled out the red carpet for the former investment banker. Macron delivered a long and florid speech on the Pynx at the foot of the Acropolis. As twilight fell, he spoke of the "future" of Europe, with no shortage of platitudes about the heritage of ancient democracy.

The French president proposed the extension and redirection of the European institutions, and stressed: "In order not to be dominated by great powers such as the Chinese or Americans, I believe in a European sovereignty that permits us to defend and assert ourselves." He also called for debt relief for Greece, and for the US-dominated IMF to withdraw from the Greek debt programme, something Germany strictly opposes.

Essentially, Macron seeks the strengthening of the European Union as an imperialist counter-weight to the US, and as a bulwark against the European working class. This is also Syriza's perspective.

Tsipras posted photos of himself with his "friend" Macron on Twitter, and wrote: "We support initiatives for a new economic and financial architecture of the EU towards a more democratic and social Europe."

He declared that his country had "opened a new chapter" and assured Macron that he would "not regret investing in Greece." Macron was accompanied by several French businesses that hope to profit from the purchase of Greek state-owned enterprises. Energy company Total is extracting oil and gas in the Ionian Sea, and is interested in resources in the Mediterranean. An international consortium with French participation recently took over the running of the port at Thessaloniki. The Suez conglomerate is interested in taking over the water supply in both Athens and Thessaloniki.

A member of the French delegation told the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* that contracts would be agreed for the Greek purchase of French military hardware in the next months.

In the mainstream Greek media and government circles, Macron was treated like a superstar. In an interview with the state news agency ANA-MPA, vice foreign minister Giorgos Katrougalos (Syriza) gushed, "The visit of Macron was a great political event, not just for the two countries' bilateral relations, but also for the future of Europe." That Macron had brought the "leaders of the French business world" was a "confirmation of the transformation of the Greek economy towards growth."

According to Katrougalos, Tsipras and Macron would share the view that the economic policy of the euro zone had to be "democratized." The Greek premier had even proposed the appointment of a European "minister for social cohesion." "Growth and social cohesion" were the precondition for the "new social model of just development that our government is already pursuing."

Katrougalos, who was minister of labour from 2015 to 2016, knows exactly whereof he speaks. The "new social model of just development" is a euphemism for the aggressive austerity policies that have led, in recent years, to an unparalleled redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top in Greece. The call to make this the example to follow throughout Europe should be understood by European workers as an unconcealed threat.