

The working class moves against Greece's Syriza government

Alex Lantier**19 January 2018**

This week, tens of thousands of workers in key industries in Greece took strike action against European Union (EU) austerity measures imposed by the Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government. This action took place amid a rising wave of strikes and mass protests across Europe and the Middle East—with clashes in Iran and Tunisia, and strikes in Germany and Britain.

The international resurgence of the class struggle at the beginning of 2018, and in particular the struggle in Greece, poses critical questions of political perspective and strategy. An unmistakable indication of its revolutionary implications is the fact that masses of workers are coming into conflict with a pseudo-left party that has passed for the “radical left” or the “far left” of the political establishment. The working class is emerging as the main force defending basic social and democratic rights in political struggle against Syriza.

The measures Syriza is imposing are proof that it and its sister parties are not “left,” but right-wing parties, consciously hostile to the workers. The EU “multi-bill” includes prohibitions on strikes; cutting workers’ bonuses paid for heavy or dangerous work; drastic cuts or the elimination of family benefits for nearly 70,000 families; measures to facilitate foreclosures; a wave of new school closures; the deregulation of energy and transport companies, pharmacies, bakeries, and other firms; and the building of casinos.

Workers protested in particular Syriza’s attack on the right to strike, inscribed in the Greek constitution. One worker bitterly noted, “Blood was shed by generations that came before us to have the right to strike. Now a so-called left-wing government is trying to abolish it.” Another compared Syriza’s attack on the right to strike to the CIA-backed junta of the colonels, which ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974 and bloodily suppressed the left: “Such things happened only during the junta. This government is leftist in name only. In deeds it’s a junta.”

Like the junta of the colonels, the Syriza junta and the EU bankers’ dictatorship can only be defeated through the international mobilization of the working class in

revolutionary struggle. What is required is a ruthless break with the old, rotten forms of what has passed for “left” politics.

This means a turn towards the perspective of world socialist revolution and the classical Marxist traditions of the October Revolution and the Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, continued by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—the only tendency to warn the workers of Syriza’s political role before it took power in 2015.

As Syriza won those elections, pledging to end six years of devastating EU austerity imposed by successive social-democratic and conservative governments, it was hailed as a model by its sister parties internationally. France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) declared, “The election victory of Syriza is excellent news. It fills everyone with hope who is fighting against austerity in Europe.”

The Greek affiliates of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the United States wrote, “Syriza as a political party is irreplaceable. The functioning of its organizational bodies and membership, with collective participation and democracy throughout the party, is not an optional extra, but a pre-condition for the final victory of Syriza, and the final victory of the whole of the left and of our people.”

The ICFI alone warned that Syriza was not a revolutionary party seeking to lead the working class in the seizure of power, but a reactionary party of the affluent middle class seeking to buttress its privileges by running the Greek capitalist state and promoting nationalism and the EU.

We wrote in January 2015, prior to the Syriza victory, “For working people, a Syriza government would not represent a way out of the crisis; on the contrary, it would represent an enormous danger. Despite its left-wing façade, Syriza is a bourgeois party that rests on affluent layers of the middle class. Its policies are determined by union bureaucrats, academics, professionals and parliamentary functionaries, who seek to defend their privileges by preserving the social order.”

This was confirmed immediately once Syriza came to power. Making no appeal to mobilize the workers in other countries against EU austerity, Syriza instead formed a coalition with the far-right Independent Greeks and began negotiating austerity with the EU. Less than a month after taking power, it betrayed its pledge to end the EU austerity Memorandum and extended it instead. Syriza Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis later said that in talks with the EU at the time, he proposed right-wing, “standard Thatcherite or Reaganesque” policies.

Syriza spent the spring and the summer desperately seeking a way to justify scrapping its election promises and imposing austerity, ultimately calling a referendum on EU austerity in July. Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras hoped, in the words of long-time Syriza admirer Tariq Ali, that “the ‘Yes’ camp would win, and planned to resign and let EU stooges run the government.” However, in a referendum vote starkly polarized along class lines, Greece voted “no” to austerity by 62 percent.

Tsipras responded by trampling the vote and imposing the EU social cuts nonetheless, including massive pension cuts and other attacks on the working class.

These events demonstrated the irreconcilable conflict between the workers, on the one hand, and Syriza and its other pseudo-left supporters on the other. Tsipras and his supporters tried to present and promote this betrayal along nationalist lines, as the inevitable outcome of an unequal struggle between cash-strapped Greece and the wealthier EU.

Speaking to the banks and major investors, however, Tsipras presented Greece as a new, low-wage haven where super-profits could be realized thanks to his attacks on the workers. “Foreign investors are welcome,” he said, “and they will find a government with a clear mandate to bring about change to the country... In a few years, Greece will become a prime destination for foreign investment, this is my opinion and my desire.”

At the same time, Syriza enthusiastically backed imperialist wars led or supported by the NATO powers—hosting US bases for potential use in attacks on Syria, and selling weapons to Saudi Arabia for use in its war in Yemen. This culminated in Tsipras’ embrace of the right-wing billionaire and US president, Donald Trump, in a state visit to Washington last year where he declared: “The US is a very strong power and its ability to intervene for good is very, very important. We have common values.”

Syriza’s passage of strike-breaking legislation underscores that Tsipras’ declaration that he shares common values with Trump was not a slip of the tongue. It was an accurate reflection of Syriza’s right-wing politics and class loyalties. It is an indictment of all those tendencies—from the NPA and

ISO to Spain’s Podemos, Germany’s Left Party or the various components of the Momentum group inside the leadership of Britain’s Labour Party—that promoted Syriza or took it as a model for their own activities.

This betrayal is a strategic experience of the international working class. Syriza has demonstrated the absolute impossibility for the working class to obtain anything if it is strangled inside a national framework and accepts a pro-capitalist perspective of working through the existing capitalist state machine and trade unions.

The turn must be to the construction by the working class of independent organizations of struggle in workplaces and neighborhoods, waging a common revolutionary fight across all the countries of Europe against the reactionary policies of the EU. Above all, the critical question is building the ICFI as the international revolutionary leadership in the working class that will explain to workers that these struggles are part of an unfolding process of world socialist revolution, posing to workers in every country the task of taking power and building a workers’ state pursuing socialist policies.

The ICFI’s criticisms of Syriza established that it is the organization that can offer this revolutionary leadership. Its criticisms were not acts of “sectarianism,” as claimed by Pabloite groups like the NPA. Rather, they demarcated the line between the ICFI, the revolutionary leadership of the working class, and strike-breaking militarist parties like Syriza and its political accomplices.

The pseudo-left groups are reactionary charlatans conscious of their own hostility to the workers. The Pabloite *International Viewpoint* web site recently published an article, “Greece, a story without the distorting prism of Syriza,” that confesses that their movement’s “leadership, as well as the leaderships of most international revolutionary currents, have uncritically supported SYRIZA, and thus bear their own responsibility for having helped SYRIZA hegemonize the social current that arose against austerity, which induced passivity among the working class, false electoral expectations and, finally, a disaster.”

The one international tendency that this article dared not mention was the ICFI, which consistently opposed and exposed Syriza and the Pabloites’ promotion of it. This underscores that the new Marxist leadership that is to be built are sections of the ICFI in Greece and in every country.



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