

Three years since Syriza's referendum on EU austerity in Greece

Alex Lantier
6 July 2018

Yesterday marked the third anniversary of the referendum on European Union (EU) austerity held by Greece's Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government. Syriza's trampling on the resounding "no" vote by millions of Greek workers was a strategic experience of the working class, whose international relevance is only increasing as ever broader layers of workers across Europe and the world come into struggle against capitalist austerity.

Syriza took power in January 2015 after a year of strikes across Greece by public-sector, port and television workers and mass student protests against EU cuts that had slashed living standards by over 30 percent since the 2008 Wall Street crash.

Syriza had promised to scrap the EU austerity Memorandum, renegotiate relations with the EU and improve people's lives within the framework of the EU and capitalism. Six months later, its perspective had failed. It faced unrelenting EU demands to either make deep new cuts or face a cutoff of credit, plunging Greece into bankruptcy. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras called a referendum on EU austerity for July 5, 2015.

The events that unfolded provided a bitter lesson that the only way forward for the working class is a revolutionary socialist struggle for power. They comprehensively exposed the class gulf separating workers from an entire international layer of bankrupt anti-Marxist parties like Syriza—based on the affluent middle class and theoretically rooted in postmodernism and gender and racial identity politics.

The working class made clear by the referendum that it was ready to fight. It defied wall-to-wall media propaganda for a "yes" vote based on the claim that voting against EU bank bailouts would produce a catastrophe: the bankruptcy of the state and the banks, and Greece's expulsion from the euro currency. Despite these threats, over 61 percent voted "no" to austerity.

Syriza responded, however, by betraying its own referendum. Tsipras announced that there would be no break with the EU and that he would meet with the other pro-austerity parties, the social democratic PASOK and the right-

wing New Democracy. Less than a week later, he signed a bill making €13 billion in cuts to pensions, wages and health care, and privatizing ports and airports across the country.

The working class found itself in a political trap sprung by the pseudo-left Syriza. Having elected a party claiming to be "left," it faced a government determined to impose right-wing policies of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and support for imperialist wars.

The referendum was based on lies. Tsipras had said he was calling it to obtain a "no" vote and strengthen his bargaining position against the EU. "Our aim is for the referendum to be followed by negotiations for which we will be better armed," he declared.

In fact, as Tsipras began imposing draconian austerity, Syriza's supporters internationally admitted that he had called the referendum as a cynical trick.

Tariq Ali, the British Pabloite ally of Spain's Podemos and France's New Anti-capitalist Party, wrote: "It's no longer a secret here that Tsipras and his inner circle were expecting a 'yes' or a very narrow 'no.'... Why did Tsipras hold a referendum at all? 'He's so hard and ideological,' Merkel complained to her advisers. If only. It was a calculated risk. He thought the 'yes' camp would win, and planned to resign and let EU stooges run the government."

Syriza's finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, who said during the referendum campaign that he would happily step down after a "yes" vote, recounts in his recent book *Adults in the Room* how fear, horror and anger spread over Syriza on the night of its ostensible referendum victory.

As he walked into the Maximos prime minister's residence that night, Varoufakis writes, "Maximos felt as cold as a morgue, as joyful as a cemetery." He met Tsipras, who referred to previous executions of Greek politicians. According to Varoufakis, Tsipras warned "that something like a coup might take place, telling me that the president of the Republic, Stournaras, the intelligence services and members of our government were in a 'readied state.'"

With this reactionary threat—that if he failed to impose the EU diktat, sections of his own government might join in the

first military coup in Greece since the CIA-backed 1967 military uprising that installed the fascistic junta of the colonels—Tsipras then charted a pro-austerity course.

This historic betrayal vindicated the warnings issued by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) even before Syriza took power. The ICFI alone warned that Syriza would prove bitterly hostile to the workers. Its assessment was based on the class lessons of decades of Trotskyist struggle against the Stalinist parties and state capitalist groups like the US International Socialist Organization, whose Greek representatives fully integrated themselves into Syriza, a party that they described as politically “irreplaceable” and a “precondition... for the final victory of the whole of the left and of our people.”

As Tsipras took office, the ICFI wrote, “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.”

While pseudo-left organizations the world over were hailing the referendum called by Tsipras as confirmation that he and Syriza were going to wage a fight, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in a June 27, 2015 statement that it was “a reactionary fraud, designed to lend a veneer of democratic legitimacy to the looting of Greece by the banks at the expense of workers and broad sections of the middle class.”

Not a word needs to be changed. Since then, Syriza has pursued a thoroughly right-wing course, imposing tens of billions of euros in social cuts and selling arms to Saudi Arabia to wage a bloody, US-backed war in Yemen. It not only passed EU laws to prevent workers from taking strike action, but it has run “hotspot” prison camps, in line with the EU’s draconian anti-immigrant policy, in which thousands of refugees fleeing wars in Syria and Iraq are subjected to horrific conditions.

By hailing Syriza, the pseudo-left parties showed that they would only carry out similar policies. And indeed, Syriza’s closest ally, Podemos, is now the main prop of a minority social democratic government that is continuing the austerity policies, military buildup and jailing of Catalan political prisoners of the previous right-wing Spanish government.

In warning the Greek workers about Syriza, the ICFI fought for the building of a revolutionary alternative. The experience of Syriza has underscored that only a return to the traditions of the Bolshevik Party and the October 1917 revolution can provide a viable strategy for the working class. In its statement “The Political Lessons of Syriza’s

Betrayal in Greece,” the ICFI stressed:

... the working class cannot defend itself by electing new, ‘left’ capitalist governments.

The only way forward is through a genuinely revolutionary policy, mobilizing the working class in Greece and internationally in struggle. It requires a direct assault on the capitalist class, the confiscation of their wealth, the seizure of the major banks and productive forces, in order to place them under the democratic control of working people, and the creation of workers states across Europe and the world. Such struggles require the building of Marxist parties to offer political leadership to the working class, in ruthless struggle against parties like Syriza.

This is the most fundamental lesson of the Syriza experience. However politically criminal the record of Syriza, it serves till this day as a model for a host of pseudo-left organizations in Europe, the US and internationally, who only await the summons of the capitalist ruling class to carry out similar betrayals.

The only way forward lies in building genuinely revolutionary Marxist parties to provide political leadership to the working class in an uncompromising struggle against pseudo-left parties like Syriza. The turn now is to building sections of the ICFI in Greece, across Europe and internationally.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact