

Greek general election takes place amid mass discontent with rotten political set-up

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The Greek general election takes place on Sunday, with its political parties in crisis amid mass discontent in the working class, whose social position has been decimated by over a decade of austerity.

Four year ago, the conservative New Democracy (ND) party was the undeserving beneficiary of popular hatred towards SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left)—which had just imposed four years of even worse cuts than had previous ND and social democratic PASOK governments. SYRIZA came to power on a landslide after promising to end austerity.

This year, the voting age has been lowered to 17 for the first time. Those aged 16 will also be able to vote if they turn 17 in an election year. In another first, Greek citizens living abroad will be permitted to vote in their country of residence, meaning more than 9.8 million Greeks are eligible.

SYRIZA passed the laws while in power but is unlikely to benefit significantly. It is an indictment of the organisation—the doyen of pseudo-left parties internationally—that despite a further four years in opposition, it is unable to offer anything to convince workers it would shape their lives for the better.

Up to 13 percent of voters, including many young people, are undecided who to vote for, reflecting popular hostility to the whole range of pro-capitalist parties which have conspired to wreck workers' living conditions. Political realities in Greece were encapsulated this February by the tragic Tempi train crash, as millions protested for weeks over the preventable deaths of 57 mainly young people as a result of years of budget cuts and privatisation.

SYRIZA was unable to benefit from this opposition. No-one forgot that it was SYRIZA that primed the state-owned TrainOSE for privatisation, including by keeping the workforce at unsafe levels, before selling it off for peanuts to Italian railway operator Ferrovie Dello Stato

Italiane.

Going into the election, ND's lead over SYRIZA has fallen from a long-standing double-digit lead but is still around 5-7 points. PASOK is in third place in the polls at around 10 percent.

It is expected that the first round will give no party a working majority, with attempts to be made to establish a coalition. An agreement between ND and other right-wing parties is a possibility, or an alliance with PASOK. A complication is that one of the main factors in ND's political crisis is last year's revelation that the National Intelligence Agency (EYP) illegally hacked the phone of PASOK president Nikos Androulakis.

The government and its media backers are fighting the election on the basis that the economic measures they have implemented have stabilised Greece and made it highly investible once again as a profitable haven for the banks and corporations.

Earlier this year, Bank of Greece governor Yannis Stournaras said he was “confident” that credit rating agencies would upgrade Greek bonds within months, to investment-grade credit rating, after over a decade when they were deemed junk bonds.

But for this to happen, it would require the new government to continue brutal austerity. Stournaras declared, “Greece has managed to correct macroeconomic imbalances and improve price and wage competitiveness, but structural competitiveness remains low compared to other eurozone members,” and “A sustainable fiscal effort will be needed” by the incoming government.

Turning Greece into an investor's paradise requires a further onslaught against a working class already bled dry. Inflation reached over 12 percent last year, yet average annual wages are still around 25 percent below their peak from 2009 according to OECD data. Pay was brutally suppressed by the SYRIZA government, with the minimum monthly salary going up to just €650 from €586 over its

period in office. Young people are paid pittance wages, but many still cannot get a job, with youth unemployment at nearly 25 percent.

Used as a test bed for austerity across Europe, Greece has seen parties across the political spectrum carry out an historic reduction in the living standards of workers, facilitated by the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy which acts as a partner to the governing parties.

The mouthpiece of finance capital, the *Financial Times*, insists that this class war agenda be stepped up. It editorialised this week that Greece “is one of the fastest growing economies in the bloc, and its central bank governor expects it to regain its investment-grade credit rating this year,” however, “it is vital that the next government builds on the hard-won progress. The foundations for the economic revival were forged by successive governments enacting austerity measures, including tax rises, public sector wage controls and changes to pensions.”

This is the FT’s prescription even as it notes how the “high cost of living has ... compounded the suffering of Greeks following years of austerity: the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is one of the highest in the EU.”

An example of this grinding poverty was given in a Reuters interview with a working class Athens resident. Niki Klaoudatou, a 40-year-old telephone company employee, told the news agency she was earning just €850 a month, the same as she “did as a 20-year-old supermarket worker in 2004.”

The article noted, “Klaoudatou, who shares a small apartment in the Athens suburb of Alimos with her two children and her mother, has seen her mortgage rise to 450 euros a month, 100 euros more than a year ago. She shares expenses with her mother, who receives a monthly pension of around 850 euros. But still the family cannot make ends meet.”

As well as high fuel prices, workers’ income is leeches by rising food prices and an array of regressive taxes including a 13 percent value-added tax on food products and sales tax on essential goods such as milk and bread. On her attitude to the election, the mother said, “I’m going to vote for a small party, more to show that I am not happy with the bigger parties.”

None of the parties of the ruling class offer any alternative for the working class. SYRIZA proposes nothing more than increasing the monthly minimum wage to just €880, and public sector workers’ pay by 10 percent—going nowhere near compensating for the losses

over the past decade. Its proposals to reinstate an annual bonus pension up to €500 and raise all pensions by 7.5 percent are similarly pathetic, and would in any case be junked as soon as demanded by international investors.

In a debate held between the main party leaders earlier this month, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras emphasised the restraint shown in the party’s spending proposals, insisting that he was “fully aware of the country’s fiscal capabilities.” He has declared himself open to participating in any governing coalition, not wanting to “exclude anyone in advance.” In 2015, SYRIZA entered government with the xenophobic Independent Greeks as its junior partners.

Whatever rotten coalition emerges will maintain the offensive against the working class. It will do so as part of Greece’s continuing commitment to a NATO alliance now waging war against Russia. Athens is NATO’s highest military spender in GDP terms, €7.44 billion last year, representing 3.54 percent of GDP. This is even higher than the United States’ 3.46 percent.

In the party leaders’ debate, Tsipras said his party would “obviously honour the defence contracts Greece has signed, but will fight to bring projects to the Greek defence industry as well.” He complained, “it is unacceptable that a programme of 14-15 billion euros has not brought a single euro to the Greek defence industry.”

The debate he contributed so enthusiastically to was framed around a supposedly imminent invasion from Turkey. Asked by ERT’s host what he would do in government if Turkish commandos landed on a Greek islet, former SYRIZA finance minister and current leader of MeRA25 (European Realistic Disobedience Front) Yanis Varoufakis responded, “The defence of our national space is an obligation we all have.”



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