

10 years since the Greek referendum: The lessons of Syriza's betrayal

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Ten years ago this month, the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government in Greece overturned the overwhelming result of a national referendum rejecting austerity. On July 5, 2015, Greek workers delivered a decisive vote against further austerity measures demanded by the European Union. Syriza responded by ramming through the very cuts the population had just repudiated.

The referendum was a critical experience for the international working class, with enormous political lessons that are of burning relevance in the present political situation.

Syriza came to power in January 2015 on the promise to end the brutal austerity imposed by the European Union (EU). In the preceding years, Greece had become the epicenter of a global assault on wages, pensions and social services in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. In the years leading up to the election, Greek workers mounted dozens of general strikes, in a powerful expression of resistance to the unprecedented cuts imposed at the behest of international finance.

Media portrayals, denunciations by EU leaders and Syriza’s own rhetoric fostered illusions that the Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras and his finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, would mount resistance to EU diktats. Across Europe and internationally, pseudo-left and “anti-capitalist” parties hailed Syriza’s victory as a breakthrough for the left and a model for resistance to austerity.

Syriza moved rapidly to repudiate its electoral pledges. After forming a government with the right-wing nationalist Independent Greeks (Anel)—a signal to the ruling class in Greece and internationally that it posed no fundamental threat to its interests—Tsipras and Varoufakis went begging throughout Europe for a few crumbs that they could sell to Greek workers. When these were rebuffed, Syriza signed an agreement that it would “refrain from any rollback” of austerity measures and would “honor [Greece’s] financial obligations to all their creditors.”

Then, in an act of grotesque cynicism, Syriza called the July 2015 referendum in the expectation that the population, exhausted and demoralized, would vote “Yes,” providing the government with cover for its capitulation. While formally endorsing a “No” vote, Syriza made clear that such a result would provoke the full wrath of capitalist Europe—and that it had no plan, and no intention, to resist the demands of the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

In a statement published on July 3, 2015, two days before the referendum, “The political fraud of Syriza’s referendum on EU austerity in Greece,” the WSWS warned workers in advance that

the referendum was a political trap:

Were Tsipras to concisely explain to working people the content of his referendum, he could say: heads the EU wins, tails you lose. Coming only months after Syriza won an election pledging to end five years of austerity, the referendum has been called to give political cover for a surrender to the EU. Had Syriza intended to fight, it would have had no need to call a referendum on EU austerity already rejected by the Greek people.

This assessment was vindicated in what followed. The Greek working class delivered a landslide “Oxi”/No vote, 61 to 39 percent, on July 5, 2015. A furious ruling class demanded even harsher measures. Tsipras immediately scurried back to Brussels and, on July 13, agreed to the EU’s diktat, passing the worst ever austerity package through parliament with the votes of more than two thirds of its representatives.

Not a single leading member of Syriza made any effort to mobilize the opposition of the Greek working class to throw out this government of traitors—a movement that would have won mass support across Europe and internationally. Varoufakis instead resigned, retreating to his luxury island home.

Throughout these developments, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International explained fundamental political issues. In a statement published on July 30, 2015, “What is the pseudo-left,” the WSWS reviewed Syriza’s betrayal as part of a broader international phenomenon.

The WSWS defined the pseudo-left as political forces that “utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class.” The pseudo-left “opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution... The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic.”

Syriza was part of a broader tendency that first appeared clearly during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, when ostensibly “left” forces intervened to derail mass revolutionary upheaval and channel it back into bourgeois politics.

In the years following Syriza’s betrayal, workers and youth encountered similar experiences around the world: The “Pink

Tide” in Latin America subordinated opposition to the interests of American imperialism; Podemos in Spain joined an austerity government led by the Spanish Socialist Party; Jeremy Corbyn in Britain defused mass opposition to austerity and war, and allowed the viciously reactionary Labour right to retake control; and in the US, Bernie Sanders funneled growing discontent behind Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.

The political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau provided the ideological framework for this trend. Their conception of “left populism” rejected Marxism and the central role of the working class, advocating instead a revival of petit-bourgeois nationalism and reformism that had no reforms to offer.

These betrayals have had catastrophic consequences for the working class over the last decade, paving the way for the further enrichment of a super-wealthy oligarchy and plunging millions into social crisis.

Drawing conclusions from these events is not a matter of bemoaning the failures or deceit of specific leaders and parties, but of understanding and rejecting the bankruptcy of their politics.

All of them sought to recruit the working class to a program of minimal reforms, centered on issues of personal identity rather than social class, from the ruling class. Their program, based on the preservation of the capitalist system, largely ignored the critical issues of property ownership, the concentration of wealth in the ruling elites, staggering levels of social inequality, and imperialist militarism.

When the meager reformist aspirations encountered resistance from the ruling elites and their state, all traces of a reformist program were abandoned, and yet another government of austerity was imposed.

As Leon Trotsky observed in his *History of the Russian Revolution*:

In practice a reformist party considers unshakable the foundations of that which it intends to reform. It thus inevitably submits to the ideas and morals of the ruling class. Having risen on the backs of the proletariat, the social democrats became merely a bourgeois party of the second order.

History has once again placed before the international working class the same question posed in the 2010s, but now with the stakes far higher.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered an acceleration of capitalist austerity, militarism, and social counterrevolution. Millions of lives were sacrificed to the virus to preserve corporate profits. Inflation devastated workers’ living standards. War erupted in Europe, a genocide was unleashed in Gaza, and military budgets exploded in every major imperialist power—all to be financed through the destruction of what remains of the social gains won by the working class in the 20th century.

Alongside these attacks, the ruling class has turned increasingly toward fascism and dictatorship, most sharply expressed in the rise of Donald Trump in the United States and the growing

authoritarianism of capitalist governments around the world.

Once again, workers responded with a wave of strikes and protests. The years 2022 and 2023 saw the highest number of strike days in the UK since the 1980s. In the US, 2023 saw more major strikes than at any time in the previous two decades. This industrial action was joined by unprecedented protest movements, including mass demonstrations against the Gaza genocide in the UK and the millions-strong “No Kings” protests in the US.

State repression of these movements—and above all, the ongoing sabotage by the trade union bureaucracy—have pushed workers to search for political answers beyond militancy on the picket lines and in the streets. It is this process that has thrust Zohran Mamdani in the US, Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, and similar figures elsewhere into the spotlight. Even Varoufakis has the audacity to present himself as a left-wing figure.

The fulfillment of workers’ socialist aspirations can only come once the advanced layers of the working class learn to reject and oppose the bankrupt semi-reformism of the leaders they presently support. Without this, the working class will be forced to repeat the Syriza experience—with ever more disastrous consequences.

After describing the logic of a reformist party, Trotsky counterposed the Bolshevik Party, built above all by Vladimir Lenin, which led the Russian October Revolution of 1917:

The necessary distance from bourgeois ideology was kept up in the party by a vigilant irreconcilability... Lenin never tired of working with his lancet, cutting off those bonds which a petty-bourgeois environment creates between the party and official social opinion... the Bolshevik party created not only a political but a moral medium of its own, independent of bourgeois social opinion and implacably opposed to it.

It is in this tradition that the Socialist Equality Parties around the world seek to win workers to the program of revolutionary socialist internationalism. We encourage workers and young people who see the need for a new, socialist party of the working class to study the experience of Syriza and the statements published by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Study the principles of the SEP—and make the decision to join.



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