

Greek elections reflect mass opposition to austerity

By Christoph Dreier
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Greek parliamentary elections on Sunday resulted in a stunning collapse in the vote for the two main governing parties, PASOK and New Democracy, which received only 32 percent of the vote between them.

The result is a clear popular repudiation of the policies of austerity, dictated by the EU, international banks and the Greek ruling class. The main beneficiaries of the shift in popular sentiment to the left, however, do not represent a genuine alternative.

The social democratic PASOK party, which has led the government since 2009, saw its vote plummet from 43.9 percent in the last elections to 13.2 percent. The vote for the conservative New Democracy Party, which forged a coalition with PASOK in December last year, fell from 33.5 in 2009 to 18.9 percent. The two-party system that has existed in Greece since the end of military dictatorship has been effectively terminated.

Official projections late Sunday predicted that PASOK and New Democracy would fall one seat short of being able to form a majority in parliament. That they are even close to the required number is only due to an anti-democratic provision that automatically allocates an additional 50 seats to the party winning the highest percentage of the vote—in this case, New Democracy.

In a further indication of public disgust with the political system, the abstention rate was a record-breaking high of nearly 40 percent, according to estimates from the interior ministry. This is much higher than in the three previous elections, where abstention rates ranged from 25 to 30 percent.

In recent years the government has carried out historically unprecedented social cuts that have led to real wage losses of up to two-thirds, youth unemployment of more than 50 percent, and mass

poverty and homelessness.

The parties that verbally opposed this policy registered strong electoral gains. The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) was able to triple its vote from 4.6 percent to 16.8 percent. It has overtaken PASOK as second largest party in parliament. During its campaign, SYRIZA declared its intention to renegotiate austerity measures. It promised substantial investment in infrastructure, education and other social programs.

The Democratic Left, which split off from SYRIZA in 2010 in order to take a more pro-PASOK orientation, also criticized the austerity measures during its election campaign. In its first ever election it received 5 percent.

Both SYRIZA and the Democratic Left, which speak for better off sections of the middle class, are well practiced in a politics that is aimed at keeping mass discontent shackled to the trade unions and PASOK.

The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) was only able to slightly improve its vote from 7.5 percent to 8.5 percent. The Greek electorate has a long experience of the opportunism of the Stalinist KKE and does not trust the party to in any way challenge the political establishment. The Greek Greens and the Democratic Alliance won just 3 percent of the vote respectively.

The right-wing parties, which have been systematically built up in the media in recent weeks, received a relatively small share of the vote. The LAOS party, which participated for a short time in government, lost votes. The neo-fascist Golden Dawn gained 7 percent and will enter the new parliament.

The right-wing populist party, the Independent Greeks, won 10.6 percent of the vote. The party was founded in February this year by former ND deputies led by Panos Kammenos, after they were expelled from the ND for failing to support the last austerity package.

The party made xenophobia its central election issue, combining social demands such as a reversal of the cuts with an extremely nationalist perspective.

These parties were given a massive boost in the election campaign by PASOK and ND. The two governing parties sought to outdo one another with xenophobic and nationalistic demagoguery and practice in an attempt to direct popular anger against the cuts into right-wing channels. In doing so they paved the way for the extreme right.

For its part, SYRIZA announced that it is prepared to make a pact with the racist Independent Greeks in the event of an election victory.

The elections will further destabilize the political situation in Greece. PASOK and ND had been able to rule previously with a comfortable parliamentary advantage. Now they will be unable to put together a governing majority. The European press is already debating whether a new government will be stable enough to enforce the planned cuts, or whether there should be new elections.

Any new Greek government intent on continuing the austerity policies of the EU will face massive opposition from the population. In this situation, there is a serious danger that the ruling elite will respond by seeking to integrate the right and extreme right-wing parties in government and thereby establish authoritarian forms of rule in order to brutally suppress all popular resistance.

At the same time there would be nothing progressive in the formation of a coalition government involving nominally left-wing parties. Both SYRIZA and the Democratic Left have repeatedly made clear that they are determined to remain in the EU and would merely seek to re-negotiate the austerity measures. Such a government would follow the example of PASOK and work together with the trade unions and various petty-bourgeois groups to enforce the cuts against the working population.

Such a formation would also receive the backing of the KKE. The KKE will assume the role of stewarding and disciplining protests in order to render them harmless for the new government. It already has a track record in this respect with regard to the outgoing government.

The Greek election result is indicative of a swing to the left by broad sections of the electorate and working

masses. At the same time, the pseudo-left organizations that have profited from this swing have made clear that they are intent on maintaining and defending the existing order. The election is the prelude to a new round of fierce social conflicts that can only be resolved by the construction of a new revolutionary socialist leadership in Greece.

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