

Syriza's election defeat: A balance sheet of a political betrayal

9 July 2019

The election defeat Sunday of the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government brings to a close a strategic experience for the Greek and international working class.

When Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras took office four years ago, pledging to end the European Union (EU) austerity Memorandum, the entire middle-class pseudo-left declared the party's victory a massive triumph for the working class and a “radical” alternative to capitalism.

These forces held Syriza up as a model for all the parties and political leaders “of the 99 percent”—from the Podemos party in Spain to British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and America's self-styled “socialist” candidate Bernie Sanders.

Instead, Syriza imposed a set of deeper austerity measures than any government in modern history, save the Stalinist Communist Party in its dissolution of the USSR, while turning the country into a quasi-police state and carrying out the most draconian anti-refugee policy in all of Europe.

Four years later, a frustrated, impoverished electorate threw Tsipras out. Amidst mass abstention, the despised, right-wing New Democracy (ND) is back in office.

A deafening silence reigns in Spain's *Cuarto Poder*, Britain's *Socialist Worker* and America's *Jacobin* magazine on the reasons for this defeat. But it was the predictable outcome of Syriza's rank betrayal of its election promises. Since taking office in January 2015, it has slavishly signed on the dotted line for every austerity memorandum, bank bailout and social cut demanded by the EU.

These four years have vindicated the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) analysis of the class gulf separating workers from “left populist” parties of the affluent middle class. These organizations have nothing to do with socialism. If the university professors, media operatives and union bureaucrats leading Syriza could speak frankly about what they think of the reactionary outcome of their term in office, they would say: “Mission Accomplished.”

In 2012, when Tsipras traveled to Washington to audition before the CIA amid mounting working class opposition to EU austerity imposed by the ND, the WSWs warned: “In the coming class struggles, Syriza will confront the workers as an enemy. Its aim, whether in or out of power, is to contain popular opposition to austerity policies and maintain the political domination of finance capital over the working class.”

When Syriza was elected in January 2015, after a year of strikes and protests against austerity, the WSWs wrote that Syriza represented “an enormous danger. Despite its left-wing façade, Syriza is a bourgeois party that rests on affluent layers of the middle class... While its leader, Alexis Tsipras, promises the voters a (very small) lessening of the terrible austerity in Greece, he never tires of promising the representatives of the banks and governments abroad that they have ‘nothing to fear’ from a Syriza government.”

By contrast, King's College professor and ex-Syriza member Stathis Kouvelakis wrote in *Jacobin* at the time: “Syriza's electoral triumph has brought hope to the European radical left and workers' movement, offering it an immense opportunity.” He admitted that Syriza's “strategic orientation toward the EU is also rather unclear,” and that its government coalition with the far-right Independent Greeks was “an evil.” Nevertheless, he predicted a fight: “The moment of truth is at hand.”

This was as fraudulent as Tsipras' election promise to end EU austerity. Far from seeking to fight, Syriza was surprised and disturbed by mass demonstrations of workers that broke out after its election. It had no intention of mobilizing working class anger at decades of EU austerity since the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1991, and especially since the 2008 Wall Street crash.

Syriza made no appeal to broader opposition in the European and international working class. Instead, then-Syriza Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis toured the major European capitals for talks to work out a slightly modified austerity policy. Varoufakis later told the *Observer* that in these talks, during which he publicly hailed German Chancellor Angela Merkel as Europe's “most astute politician,” he proposed “standard Thatcherite or Reaganesque” economic policies.

This was why—once Berlin, London and Paris indicated they would brook no letup to austerity—Syriza quickly capitulated and, trampling its election promises underfoot, signed a new EU austerity memorandum on February 20, 2015. Syriza had all the powers of office to make an international appeal to working class discontent. But it did not want to. To enforce the types of attacks imposed by Thatcher or Reagan against British and American workers in the 1980s, it could not tolerate a wave of strikes and struggles in the working class.

Throughout the spring of 2015, Syriza sought to find ways to justify the tens of billions of euros in social attacks that it was preparing. As the EU threatened to cut off credit to Greek banks and force Greece to re-establish a national currency to avert a breakdown of its financial system, Tsipras scheduled a referendum on EU austerity for July 2015. This referendum, Syriza admirer and long-time Pabloite Tariq Ali later reported, was for Tsipras “a calculated risk. He thought the ‘Yes’ camp would win, and planned to resign and let EU stooges run the government.”

Tsipras’ first attempt to hand power back to the right failed, however. The “no” vote won by a 61 percent landslide, as workers voted overwhelmingly against austerity. Tsipras and Syriza then ignored the result of their own referendum, deciding to impose a 13-billion-euro austerity package dictated by Berlin and Brussels.

This decision was rooted in the class interests served by Syriza and epitomized by the considerable wealth of its leaders. The WSWS noted at the time: “Syriza legislator Dimitris Tsoukalas (with declared personal savings in 2013 of over €1 million), Finance Minister Tsakalotos (whose stock portfolio is worth over €500,000), Economy Minister Giorgios Stathakis (€426,000 invested with JP Morgan), former Syriza leader Alekos Alavanos (€350,000 in savings, a stock portfolio and 11 real estate properties), and former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis (whose wife Danae Stratou is a millionaire) cannot imagine or tolerate a break with the EU because—like the rest of the Greek ruling elite—they would lose a great deal of wealth if Greece exited the euro and their assets were re-denominated in a heavily devalued national currency.”

What has this meant for workers in Greece? It was the greatest economic collapse in Europe since the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union itself. Economic production fell by a quarter, incomes by over 30 percent and pensions by 50 percent, as the poverty rate rose to 35 percent. The jobless rate still stands at 18 percent and over 40 percent for youth, even after the surge in gig economy employment that Syriza has heavily touted. One Greek worker in three works on a part-time salary of €317 per month, or half the official minimum wage.

EU austerity overseen by Syriza has blighted millions of lives, throwing the working class back decades. The ending of universal healthcare has meant a surge of deaths by preventable diseases, or because cancers are discovered only in late stages of the disease due to a suspension of testing. In the workplaces, workers are routinely forced to agree to pay back part of their salary to employers as a precondition to find employment, or to forgo their salary for long periods of time. Hundreds of thousands of Greeks were forced to leave their country to try to find jobs.

Those who say that this was an inevitable outcome of an unequal fight between Greece and the entire EU are only deceiving themselves or others. The last several years have

seen the greatest upsurge of strikes and social protests, across Europe and beyond, in decades. These include the first national teachers strike in Poland since the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in 1989, French “yellow vest” protests, and strikes against EU wage freezes in Germany, Portugal and Belgium.

The Syriza government refused to appeal to and mobilize this opposition in the international working class because it was led by a cabal of petty-bourgeois gangsters determined to save the wealth of the banks and to enrich themselves.

A key concern of the Syriza government since 2015 has been to perfect techniques of police repression targeting workers. As he set up concentration camps in Greece for refugees fleeing imperialist wars in Syria and Iraq, Tsipras has also strengthened the riot police and cultivated a relationship with the butcher of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, military dictator General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. There is little doubt that, as Tsipras leaves office, plans have been well laid for him to quickly emerge personally wealthy.

Four years of the Syriza government have provided devastating political lessons, very dearly bought, for the international working class. The pressing task is to draw the political conclusions flowing from these lessons.

This experience has unforgettably demonstrated the impossibility of fighting a bankrupt capitalist order by voting for “left populist” parties to implement reforms under capitalism. The betrayal carried out by Syriza, rooted in its class basis in the affluent petty bourgeoisie, will be repeated if similar parties come to power elsewhere. The way forward is a turn to the perspective of classical Marxism, that is, Trotskyism: the revolutionary mobilization of the full industrial and economic power of the international working class to take control of economic life and state power.

The fight for this perspective requires a new revolutionary leadership in the working class. That leadership is the ICFI, which demonstrated through its opposition to Syriza the fundamental correctness of its class perspective and its orientation to the working class. The central task now is the building of sections of the ICFI in Greece and in every country.

Alex Lantier

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>