

Does Social Democracy Hold Up Half the Sky? The Decline of PASOK and the Rise of SYRIZA in Greece

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After the outbreak of the global economic crisis in 2008, Greece was the first Euro-area country where the neoliberal 'shock doctrine' was imposed. This was an attempt to place all the fallout of the systemic capitalist crisis on the shoulders of the working people. These extreme austerity policies were not left undisputed. A series of mass demonstrations and strikes ensued. The most important result of these mass movements was the fast disintegration of the political system as we used to know it, mainly through the unravelling of the Socialist Party (PASOK) that has stayed in power for more than 20 years in the last three decades and which negotiated a Troika (International Monetary Fund (IMF)-European Central Bank (ECB)-European Union (EU) 'stabilization programme' for the country and introduced class-ridden austerity policies.¹ Mass movements and popular demonstrations finally led to national elections in May and June 2012, through which the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) became the major opposition party in parliament.² In the early national elections on 25 January 2015, SYRIZA achieved a stunning victory with 36.3 per cent, as compared to 27.8 per cent of conservative New Democracy and 4.7 per cent of PASOK, the two government coalition partners until that time. This electoral result translated into 149 parliamentary seats for SYRIZA, out of a total of 300, and led to a coalition government with the 'Independent Greeks' (ANEL), an anti-austerity party stemming from the conservative political camp (4.75 per cent, 13 seats).³

However, the collapse of PASOK does not mean that social-democratic political strategies will be marginalized, or even cease to exist, in the Greek political scene.

After six months in office, the SYRIZA-ANEL government agreed on a third financing programme by the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the IMF, connected to a new austerity Memorandum. The

secession of 25 SYRIZA MPs, who soon after formed a new anti-austerity parliamentary group called Popular Unity (LAE), led to the resignation of the government and to new national elections on 20 September 2015. SYRIZA won again with 35.4 per cent and 145 seats, as compared to 28.10 per cent and 75 seats for New Democracy, and formed a new coalition government with ANEL (3.69 per cent, 10 seats). LAE, with only 2.86 per cent of the vote, did not reach the 3 per cent electoral threshold and remained without any representation in parliament.⁴

This chapter approaches the stability and prevalence of social-democratic type policies in Greece on the basis of a Marxist approach to (European) capitalism, relations of class representation and the historical tradition of the Greek left.

A SHORT EXPOSITION ON THE HISTORY AND THE IDEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF GREEK SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE COMMUNIST LEFT

Greek socialists have a tradition of political coalition or even coexistence with the communist party(ies) of Greece, longer than in most West European countries.

During the German occupation (1941–44) in World War II, a massive mobilization and armed resistance of the Greek people took place, under the leadership of the leftist National Liberation Front (EAM) in which all socialist groups and parties coexisted with the KKE. After the national liberation in October 1944, the first phase of civil war broke out (December 1944 to January 1945) in which EAM fought united against 'national' Greek police and army forces (mostly former collaborators of the Axis occupation forces) and the British army. Greek socialists did not follow KKE and the 'Democratic Army of Greece' in the second round of civil war (1946–49), however most of them participated in or collaborated with the United Democratic Left (EDA), which was founded in 1951 (two years after the final defeat of the left in the civil war) as a coalition of communist and non-communist leftists, and remained a major political party until the military coup of April 1967.⁵

Soon after the outbreak of the civil war, in 1947, a special legal framework was created, which excluded leftists from certain facets of political and social life: communist organizations were banned, communists and 'fellow travellers' were deprived of certain civic rights, such as travelling abroad, being employed in the broader public sector, obtaining a driver's licence etc.

The questioning, by the democratic and labour movement, of this 'state of the nationally minded', that is, of the oppressive anti-communist

state that emerged from the civil war, allowed EDA, in the 1950s and 1960s, to maintain a radical 'revolutionary' political physiognomy.

At the same time, the leadership of the left tried to reverse the nationalist-conservative propaganda about communist 'anti-national complicity', by presenting itself as *the* national political force par excellence. This was achieved through a discourse that presented the 'Greek society and economy' (i.e. Greek capitalism) as 'backward' and 'dependent', by means of which the left appeared as the self-appointed defender of the 'real' interests of the Greek economy (i.e. of Greek capitalism and its expanded reproduction). In this context, Greek capitalism's international economic links were interpreted as putting Greece in a state of 'dependence' and presented as a prime mover explaining and determining everything from the class relations of domination to the developmental tendencies of Greek capitalism. Social change was accordingly to be understood by the proscribed Communist Party (KKE) and EDA as the continuation of a struggle for 'national independence', the class struggle was consigned to the margins and capitalist power relations were conceived, falsely, as relations (and conflict) of 'Greek society' or 'the Greek economy' with 'foreign interests'.

As a result of this theoretical inversion, the traditional (post-Stalinist) communist left adapted to – and finally adopted – the bourgeois ideological motifs of 'all-round development of the country', 'rational organization of production' and the like, doctrines that extol the processes of capitalist accumulation and integration while concealing their essence, that is, their social content: the deepening capitalist exploitation. The left was thus gradually integrated into the capitalist strategy and tried to differentiate itself from other political currents through baseless assertions: (a) that only the left had the solutions for 'real development'; (b) that the 'existing strategy' of the Greek bourgeoisie and particularly its course in relation to Europe will inevitably lead to the 'downgrading' and perhaps even 'destruction' of the 'Greek economy'.⁶

This ideological shift of the left takes place in a historical era of rapid growth of Greek capitalism. After World War II the 'real convergence' between Greek capitalism and the more developed capitalisms of Western Europe is particularly marked in the period between 1960 and 1975 (when the per capita gross national product (GNP) of Greece increases at an average rate of 8.5 per cent annually and industrial production at 9.4 per cent annually, as against corresponding rates of growth for the (then) nine countries of the EEC of 3.8 per cent and 3.7 per cent, respectively). After the outbreak of the global overaccumulation crisis in the early 1970s, this convergence process is sustained, somewhat abated, through the succeeding decade and essentially suspended in the period

