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Greece

# Build to the left, quickly!

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## **Description:**

Not so long ago the defeat of the right wing candidates in the municipal elections in the two major cities in Greece, Athens and Thessaloniki, would have been followed by scenes of popular enthusiasm in the streets throughout the night. There was nothing like that this time, when the right was defeated in cities where it had ruled for decades!

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There are at least two reasons for this: the depth of the crisis and its impact on the lives of the majority of the population do not encourage enthusiasm for such "victories" and, linked to this, the fact that in the two cities, the two candidates were elected by approximately one sixth of the voters. The most visible lesson of the municipal and regional elections of November 7 and 14, notwithstanding comments from foreign newspapers on the alleged support of the population for the dominant party, was that they represented a scathing disavowal of PASOK and the right, although, despite encouraging results for the radical anti-capitalist left, a political alternative to the current governments has not yet emerged.

## **The crisis, ever harder**

As expected, the draconian measures required by the IMF, the European Union and Bank - a sinister trio known as the "troika" here - have had only one effect: to accentuate the crisis, which sees every day more misery (the services of the Church, which in this country provide a good part of social assistance, indicate that request for help are increasing sharply). In addition, the 2009 deficit, already significant, has been revised upward, from 13.6% of GDP to 15.4%, which will result in new demands from the troika, which has long stressed anyway that the state does not bring enough money into its coffers and spends too much. A delegation from the troika which arrived in Athens on November 15 - to be welcomed by a rally and a demonstration called by the KKE (Greek Communist Party) and the radical and anti-capitalist left - made its priorities known: strengthening the attacks on the population by attacking the public sector and adopting new work contracts with less pay than that laid down in collective agreements. Already in March, they had said: "Besides the wages you must cut, you must dismiss 200,000 workers in this sector!" On November 17, European officials indicated that the state should save 4.9 billion euros next year: Obviously nobody believes Papandreou when he assures them that there will be no dismissals. The government also refers to necessary reductions in the health sector. Recent weeks have seen very violent attacks in some areas, including in commerce where, apart from the closure of many small shops, big chains are also closing down: this is the case with FNAC, which only recently triumphantly arrived in Greece, while on November 17, the ALDI supermarket chain announced its closure, with 700 employees thrown out of work.

Another sector openly in crisis is the politically influential one of the press: the major group Lambrakis, with a tradition of established cultural patronage (the opera in Athens, the "Mégaro Moussikis" was funded by them), has just closed an old publishing house, Ellinika Grammata, throwing around a hundred employees out of work, while redundancies are raining down in the newspapers, of which the best-known are "To Vima" and "Ta Nea". We are also seeing public wealth stripping operations. Thus, a good part of the port of Piraeus has been sold to a Chinese group while an agreement is planned to sell off part of the seafront close to Athens to install casinos and luxury accommodation. So, whether or not the "Socialist" government discusses a new debt repayment schedule, what is certain is that new measures of economic strangulation of the population will not be delayed, possibly connected with the negotiation of a new memorandum.

Faced with all this, the workers try to resist, there are solidarity mobilizations, but these reactions remain very much smaller than the growing mobilization of spring. Working to connect all these struggles and prepare an overall

offensive against the policies of Papandreou and the troika are matters of urgency. Since early November, it is now possible in support of this task to point to the results of the municipal and regional elections which saw, albeit in a fragmented manner, political tendencies to the left of the PASOK gaining 1.2 million votes out of approximately 6 million voters.

## **The issues at the elections for PASOK**

Aware of its discredit, PASOK had planned to focus the campaign solely on local issues, wanting to highlight its modernism represented by its Kallikratis programme of "bringing the institutions closer to the citizen". However, this programme, for which PASOK has spared no advertising expenses, translates notably into the merger of the 1,004 existing communes into 370 super-communes, while administrative regions have been merged into 13 "super-regions. The logic of this model plan of liberal technocracy fits in with the anti-worker measures: indeed, the management of these super-communes involves public disengagement to offload onto private companies such tasks such as cleaning, green spaces, etc. The consequences for employment are mentioned above: in general, public companies are in the firing line (with the threat of removal of 60,000 contract workers) and the principle is to not replace 4 civil servants out of 5 leaving. And it is precisely by making the link between the local and national scales that the radical and anti-capitalist left has campaigned since the spring against the Kallikratis programme which in reality concerns many more people than this current alone.

But after having attempted, unsuccessfully, to lull everybody to sleep with the refrain of strictly local elections, PASOK abruptly changed its tune: two weeks before the elections, the issues had without explanation become so national that Papandreou was simply threatening to hold parliamentary elections as soon as December if his policy was not approved, without moreover defining the requisite approval threshold percentages!

Why this blackmail? In fact, PASOK never risked coming second: they were ten points ahead of the right wing New Democracy in the parliamentary elections of 2009, so there was no suspense! The real issue was that of PASOK voter disaffection and therefore of the necessary credit to continue this policy of smashing all social gains. Late August polls gave 28.6% for PASOK (43.9% in the elections of October 2009), 21.1% for the ND (33.5%), 9% for the KKE (7.5%), and 17% for small parties or spoiled votes with 10% being don't knows. During the campaign the disillusionment of PASOK voters was evident at meetings: thus in the PASOK stronghold of Patras (among the five biggest cities in the country) Papandreou could not start his meeting due to the low attendance! This note is also verified by the victory of a "diverse left" candidate' (supported by Synaspismos) above the PASOK candidate in Patras.

Overnight, Papandreou therefore turned to blackmail of the "me or chaos" type, with abject populist arguments challenging the workers' mobilization: "If the interest groups that we have affected with our reforms are saying "that's enough!", then I will have no other alternative than to address myself to the Greek people." Later, he said: "I admit that some changes, imposed out of necessity, have hurt workers, who are not responsible for the crisis. Yet maturity is required also in the trade unions: the crisis must transform all of us." (November 6, 2010 "Eleftherotypia"). A dramatisation which suddenly forgot the local issues but justified all those who had insisted for weeks on the importance of this election for beating not only PASOK and the right, but also the anti-worker policies.

## **PASOK and the right disowned**

Because the main parties were present in all 13 regions, the regional elections constituted a good reference in relation to last year's parliamentary elections. We should however be careful: the far right LAOS only ran in six

regions as such, SYRIZA was challenged by a right wing split, Aristeri Dimokratiki (Democratic left), and lists supported by Antarsya were present in 11 regions.

In any case what leaps out is the incredibly high abstention rates: running at 2.88 million votes in October 2009, it was for the first round of the regional elections 3.81 million out of a total of 9.81 million registered voters, with additionally 9.10% spoiled ballots. In the second round, which in the regional elections involved PASOK and the right alone, the abstention rate went from 39% to 53%, with an additional 11.6% of spoiled ballots! Nothing in these figures justifies the view of some European newspapers which saw these results as a successful gamble for Papandreou or as the Prime Minister escaping lightly!

In fact, the scale of the setback is even clearer in that PASOK, despite the blackmail of its leader, paid a heavy price: in the first round of the regional elections. PASOK lost approximately 1,150,000 votes, with the region of Attica, comprising one third of the voters and the most industrialised area, accounting for a loss of 446,000 votes (-7%). It counted on certain victory in the first round in three regions: it won two, including the fiefdom of Crete, where it won 50.3%, losing 71,000 votes, or 8.4%! In the third "safe" area, it lost 90,000 votes, or 9%, winning a total of 43%. In the Peloponnese, the PASOK candidate was a former right wing minister, supported also by LAOS and in Attica, if the candidate for PASOK was finally elected in the 2nd round, it was with an abstention rate of 58%, a total of 16% spoiled ballots and, here also, the support of LAOS. In the municipal elections, the two major defeats for the right did not mean a victory for PASOK alone: in Athens, the candidate Kaminis was in the second round also supported by the Greens, by Aristeri Dimokratia and by some right wing sectors, the same being true of Boutaris in Thessaloniki. In both cases against a background of gigantic abstention rates, about 65%. In addition, PASOK lost significant towns like the suburb of Aghia Paraskevi, the big city of Patras, in a duel to its left, as in the suburb of Elliniko, where the outgoing mayor, an activist who had led radical mobilizations, was supported by the Greens, SYRIZA, ANTARSYA and other left forces. In other popular suburbs, PASOK was beaten by left lists: Kaisariani, Keratsini, Elefsina and so on. With such results, it is clear that this is a major disavowal of PASOK.

The right is now headed by the former leader of a dissident nationalist group within the ND, who has the difficult task of restoring the fortunes of a party reeling from its heavy defeat last year as well as a series of scandals for which trials are currently underway. As with Papandreou for PASOK, Antonis Samaras sees a victory for the right in these elections. Observe: in the regional elections, the right, which could only advance after October 2009, lost 563,000 votes, 256,000 of them in Attica! Proclaiming that it wanted to win between 6 and 8 of the 13 regions, it obtained only five and, if it won Piraeus, it was more due to the internal crisis in PASOK than its own dynamic. It can only be welcomed: it is obviously paying for its share of responsibility in the crisis, and its demagoguery against the memorandum fooled nobody, since at the same time it supports the austerity measures. The crisis of the right is certainly a durable one and its luck is that in this period, the LAOS grouping, whose profile is equivalent to that of the Front National in France, is one of the biggest supporters of PASOK's policies. This positioning of LAOS has two consequences: an electoral weakening, where it ran, as in Attica where, with 6.57%, it lost 1% and 53,500 votes, but also the freeing up of space for openly fascist currents.

One notes then a very important fact: for the first time since the beginning of the 1980s, the bipartisanship which infected Greek political life has been dramatically weakened. The results of the elections, as well as discussions in workplaces, prove that a deep political crisis has opened, not witnessed since the junta of the colonels in the years 1967-74. It has become clear that a positive outcome to this situation depends exclusively on the responses and credibility offered by the radical anti-capitalist left. And on this terrain, things may begin to evolve.

## The results to the left of PASOK

The KKE was presented as the main winner of these elections and this is largely correct. It must be said that it began

its campaign a long time ago since it is in fact almost permanent. Indeed, the KKE favours mobilisations as the sole solution, not hesitating to accuse workers who do not vote for it of bolstering the "plutocracy". In this systematic electoral campaign, it utilises a discourse which is in part anti-capitalist. But in part only, since arguments about "real" patriotism have lately been employed, and the party continues to sow division, refusing any unity of action of workers: for it, the sole unitary framework is its PAME current, framed by itself, and on the "political scene", the KKE presents itself as alone against everyone, it being understood that the radical left defends according to this party the capitalist system!

Nevertheless, once again its campaign found an echo and the KKE was able to attract young people. Its score in the regional elections was approximately 580,000 votes, or almost 11%, with a gain of 62,600 votes and 3.5% on 2009. Yet this increase should be put into perspective. First because it was not in the most industrialised regions that the KKE advanced most: the southern Aegean Islands (+ 6,000), central Greece (+ 12,000). It even lost votes in the north Aegean (-500) and above all, its progress in Attica was very modest: certainly, it scored 14.4% but it only won 6,000 extra votes, which is very little given PASOK's losses and the gains made in the same area by Antarsya, namely + 23,000 votes. Similarly, the KKE won only a single municipality, the popular suburb of Petroupolis. Even though it is by far the main force to the left of PASOK, we must be aware of these weaknesses, which once the official period of satisfaction is over, may facilitate internal questioning, until now fairly discreet.

One of the most urgent balance sheets to be drawn is that of Syriza: this radical reformist coalition has for several months experienced existential problems, quite simply of political identity, which hark back to the confusion related to its formation. Bringing together revolutionary or radical groups around Synaspismos, without these groups having had any common project of developing an anti-capitalist wing, Syriza has been buffeted over three years by the rhythm of the polls and actual results, which hardly exceeded those of Synaspismos alone, if we put aside the good result of Alexis Tsipras in the Athens mayoral elections four years ago (more than 10%). In recent months Syriza has divided into at least three currents: the first is that of the "renovators" of Synaspismos, who eventually left the latter and Syriza also in spring to form Dimokratiki Aristera (Democratic Left). Their electoral baptism of fire electoral was satisfactory to them: presenting alliances of variable geometry (with the Greens, with Syriza, with PASOK and so on), they got quite a number of elected representatives and their regional candidate in Attica, Grigorios Psarianos, a former MP for Syriza, won 52,500 votes, or. 3.8%. This also raises their political profile as a party of elected representatives with a discourse oscillating between radicalism and the flattest reformism.

The core of Syriza, around Synaspismos, got nearly 240,000 votes (4.5%), as against 315,000 and 4.6% in October 2009. If the decline in percentage is not huge, it is more so in votes, and even if the leadership of Synaspismos expressed satisfaction at this score, it is clear that not to advance in such a context is a setback. Moreover, before the vote two Syriza MPs and the representatives of a few currents (Kokkino, AKOA, Xekinima and so on) in the secretariat highlighted in an appeal the deep crisis of the coalition, undermined by conflicts between different projects but also by centralism and bureaucracy, and affirmed its failure to promote that which had justified its creation, namely left unity and common action of the broad forces of the radical left. Their conclusion is that after the elections, Syriza can no longer continue under the same conditions. During this time, the leadership around Alexis Tsipras imposed for the municipal elections the line of turning towards PASOK cadres in disagreement with the Papandreou line, and thus in Attica the Syriza leadership hoped that the head of the regional list would record a two digit score, attracting disappointed PASOK voters: the result was a total of 89,000 votes, representing 6.2%, down by 42,000 votes from 2009. This suggests that the youth who had voted for Syriza did not identify with such combinations, while the disappointed PASOK voters did not find it credible either.

A word on the third current in Syriza, grouped around a list represented in Attica by the former leader of Synaspismos, Alekos Alavanos. Alavanos, very much on the right when he was an MEP, now uses a very leftist language, as seen in his central leaflet for the campaign whose conclusion is: "To combat youth unemployment, we are ready to go to jail." Alavanos's list, in which he had high hopes, ultimately obtained 30,000 votes, 2.2% and a single elected representative. But the most serious aspect in this case is that the disagreements between the former

and current leaderships of Synaspismos will tear apart the radical and revolutionary groups which are members of Syriza, with all the resentments that might leave. This relates to the absence of a joint project for these groups at the launch of Syriza.

## **An anti-capitalist breakthrough**

This is the good news of the elections, although modest in terms of numbers, but for many observers a new element: clearly anti-capitalist lists supported by the coalition ANTARSYA (Cooperation of the anti-capitalist left for the overthrow of the system), present in 11 of the 13 regions, scored about 2% and had seven representatives elected. Its percentages varied from 1.5% to 2.6%, much better than the usual very low vote for the Greek revolutionary left! The vote increases were spectacular and was the vote that increased the most: if the KKE got 62,500 more votes, ANTARSYA got nearly 71,000 more, reaching a total of nearly 95,500 in 11 regions. In Attica, it got 31,500 votes and elected Angelos Hagios, also leader of the NAR. And ANTARSYA supported several lists in the municipal elections, as in Athens where it got 5,500 votes (2.9%) and one elected representative, Petros Konstantinou, leader of the SEK. In various suburbs, lists supported by ANTARSYA and sometimes other forces got good scores: in Piraeus, 2%, 3% and one representative elected in Peristeri, the largest of the suburbs and a working-class neighbourhood, 2.8% and one representative elected in Petroupoli, 6.5% and one representative elected in Nea Smyrni, 5% and one representative elected in Zografou, 6.3% and one representative elected in Ymittou, 10.7% and two representatives elected in Halandri, 13.8% and two representatives elected in Vrilissia. And other good scores outside Attica in Iannina with 4.1% and one representative elected or Pyrgos with 4% and one representative elected.

This significant breakthrough has at least two explanations. The first is the dynamism of the ANTARSYA grouping in which the two strongest Greek revolutionary left organizations, the NAR and SEK are involved, as well as different groups such as OKDE-SPARTAKOS, the Greek section of the Fourth International, and individual members. We saw it throughout the mobilizations of spring, when ANTARSYA helped structure rank and file unions against the line of the GSEE confederation leadership. Big contingents on demonstrations, and an activist profile helped affirm ANTARSYA's place, with its posters and slogans present in many regions. The second reason is a vote of radicalization in favour of the only list clearly stating the need for an anti-capitalist alternative to defeat the PASOK and troika policies. In the massive vote to the left of PASOK, the vote for ANTARSYA is a bearer of hope also because sectarianism has broken down: given that outside of SYRIZA and ANTARSYA, other far-left groups called for abstention, it is clear that the Antarsya lists benefited both from the votes of voters rejecting the evolution of Syriza and those young people closer to radical proposals.

## **Organizing the counter-offensive**

The stakes emerging from this new situation are clear: ANTARSYA is now invested with new responsibilities, huge in relation to the urgency of the situation, but also if we take into account its small size and the fact that its process of constitution, work and co-operative debates remain recent. It is first and foremost about helping, despite the obstacles, the construction of a unitary and massive response to the policies of the bourgeoisie, making all the necessary proposals along the lines of a break with capitalism. Rejecting the payment of the debt, a ban on layoffs, defence and improvement of public services, these are some urgent axes, which involve extending cooperation well beyond ANTARSYA!

But another sector is of greatest urgency: on the basis of the achievements of the anti-racist battles, to organize the broadest unitary mobilization against racism and fascism, without delay. In Athens, a neo-Nazi group, Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn) has for month organized violent campaigns against immigrants in some districts and at the municipal

elections they got 10,000 votes (5.3%) with one representative elected. If electorally they have had no other successes, these practitioners of the fascist salute, enjoying a disturbing indulgence from the police, are attempting to implement their racist practices in several areas, and only an anti-racist mass mobilization can neutralise them.

Two indices of the possibilities of rapid development since the second round of the elections - the meeting hastily organised by Antarsya on November 16 with more than 1,000 highly motivated participants, and the next day, the commemoration of the massacre of students at the Athens Polytechnic by the military junta in 1973 - a 50,000 strong demonstration, with a lot of youth, and several tens of thousands in Thessalonika. Reviving the hope of being able to win by actually constructing together against the policies of poverty as the only way forward, that is the crucial issue for the weeks and months to come.

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