

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8440>



Greece

As the left fragments, an urgent reorientation is needed in Greece

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV590 - March 2024 -

Publication date: Thursday 7 March 2024

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

While there have been many mobilizations in Greece in recent years, the paralysis of the unions and the inability of the left to offer outlets are at the heart of the difficulties of the workers' movement, with the overwhelming responsibility lying with Syriza.

To help understand this landscape, we will examine the electoral results of the parliamentary elections for the right wing New Democracy party, Pasok (a social democratic party of neoliberal social orientation, for thirty years at the heart of the bourgeois two-party system, sometimes running in alliance with small centrist groups) and the parties and groups of the left. The few revolutionary groups determined to believe themselves to be the nucleus of the party and delighted to win a few hundred votes at the national level in the elections have been excluded from this picture!

– The KKE: Greek Communist Party, founded in 1918.

– Antarsya: a coalition of a large part of the anti-capitalist left, founded in 2009 as an extension of various pre-existing coalitions.

– LAE (Popular Unity): a group formed in August 2015 after the referendum result was rejected and Tsipras accepted the troika's demands. Coming from the Left Platform led by Panagiotis Lafazanis, it had a parliamentary group until the September 2015 elections, with 25 MPs leaving Syriza.

– Mera (Day, or European Front for Realist Disobedience): a group formed in 2018 by Yannis Varoufakis, finance minister under the first Syriza government (January-July 2015), which he left after his disagreement with Tsipras.

– Plevsi Eleftherias (Freedom Cruise), created by Zoé Konstantopoulou, President of the Parliament from February to August 2015, and as such co-founder in April 2015 of the Truth Commission on the Greek debt. Konstantopoulou joined LAE in August 2015 and founded Plevsi in 2016 with some former Syriza activists. We will see that if we could classify this group on the left in 2016, its trajectory makes such a classification almost impossible today.

Lately, there has been a lot of talk about Syriza, which in October 2023 appointed an unusual new president to succeed Alexis Tsipras. The findings are damning for the past four years, little has been said about what used to be the main party of the left. And this for a simple reason: while Greece has seen constant mobilizations, even during the Covid period, Syriza had very little presence there, and if activists participated it was more on their own initiative than through decisions of party collectives. Parliamentary activity has certainly remained strong, with often brilliant interventions by Tsipras, but without being able to make up for a decisive shortcoming: at no time has Syriza been able or willing to take advantage of the result of the September 2019 elections. Of course, Syriza was defeated by the right, but without the “people of the left” making it pay dearly for its denials and its acceptance of the memorandums, as if it had been granted a small discharge for having tried fighting and bowing to the strength of its opponents.

As early as September 2015, we could see this trend towards relatively maintained confidence: despite the rejection of the extraordinary popular mandate of July (61.3% “no” to obedience to the dictates of the troika, with 62.15% participation in the referendum), Syriza won the new parliamentary elections, losing only 300,000 votes, while its left-wing current, LAE, having left Syriza in August with 25 MPs, only got about half of those votes and no seats. Despite the defeat, the scenario was almost the same in July 2019: LAE collapsed completely while some of the left-wing votes lost by Syriza but also LAE were captured by Plevsi and more by MERA, which just passed the 3%

mark to obtain deputies (nine, including Varoufakis).

None of the other left-wing groups benefited electorally from Syriza's setback either in September 2015 or July 2019. On the other hand, it is with Pasok to some extent and much more with abstention that those disappointed with Syriza take refuge, even if this abstention is less a political choice than the consequence of profound social upheavals resulting in individualist withdrawals.

It can be said that in July 2019, workers and young people certainly lost their hopes or illusions with regard to the promises of radical change that Syriza was making before January 2015, but kept their confidence in it to lead a minimum of left-wing opposition to a right wing that claimed to want to “definitively close the parenthesis”, and this within the framework of a new two-party system (denounced by PASOK) which would henceforth see alternation between ND and Syriza. But we have not had the opportunity to know whether a classically reformist left-wing opposition was possible in Greece in the years 2019-2023, because Syriza has in no way met this expectation!

In order to respond positively to this question, Syriza would have had to take stock of the entire past period in 2019, with a necessary return to its 2015 electoral programme, which, although less radical than that of Pasok in 1981, had been nibbled away from the outset only to be totally betrayed with the acceptance of the third memorandum.

Such a record, made even more necessary by the position of main opponent to ND determined by the July 2019 vote, would have allowed Syriza on the one hand to give a voice to activists, on the other hand to try – if possible – to propose an openly reformist program without becoming social-liberal like Pasok. This lack of debate on the balance sheet has led to a growing neutralization of party functioning. Syriza has functioned all these years around its leadership and its parliamentary group, as if it were still the small Eurocommunist party (KKEs) of the 1970s. And at no time has it been able to build a real trade union activity.

It has also become a very small minority among the politically organised youth: in the 2023 university elections, it obtained around 2.5%, far behind the current of the KKE (PKS: about 35%) and that of the radical and revolutionary left (the EAAK, about 17%), with the ND current obtaining 26%. In the spring 2023 parliamentary elections, while some polls gave the youth vote largely in favour of Syriza, it was the right that won in this sector.

Presidentialism a fixture in party functioning

In 2022, despite the opposition of left-wing cadres, the election of Syriza's president was decided by the activists, with the possibility of joining on the same day as the vote. And so it was that in May 2022, Tsipras was re-elected president with about 150,000 votes out of 152,000, paving the way with this Bonapartist election for a suicidal course in terms of the democratic functioning of the party.

But of course, the most serious thing has been the affirmation of an increasingly social-democratic, and therefore in reality social-liberal line, simply claiming to be part of the “forces of progress.” Between 2005 and 2010, Tsipras toured Europe-an anti-capitalist revolutionary organizations to launch Syriza as an anti-capitalist force of rupture, but in recent years he has been invited to meetings of the Socialist International. This orientation of pseudo-realism has also been visible in parliamentary activity with Syriza voting for 45% of right-wing proposals (unlike Mera – 15% – and KKE – 4% – figures given on the vouliwatch website).

His search for alliances with the “forces of progress” would have been positive if it had been a question of unity of action with the forces of the left (KKE, Antarsya and so on) and an electoral alliance with some of these forces, such

as the KKE and Mera. The Syriza leadership claimed that it had tried this approach but that, since these forces rejected any form of unitary action, nothing was possible on this side. However, given the overwhelming electoral balance of forces in Syriza's favour, the latter had the space to systematize this policy of alliances on the left, and the failure of these could then have been put down to the sectarianism of others, which would certainly have led to a different electoral result and balance of forces in the spring of 2023. Instead, by abandoning this move to the left without a fight, Syriza formalised, in view of the 2023 elections, the search for an agreement at all costs with Pasok, presented as a "force for progress". This allowed the latter to regain its strength at the expense of Syriza by pretending to be more concerned with the interests of the people. This strength is all relative for PASOK, if we compare 2023 to the legislative elections of October 2009 (with a turnout of 70.95% and a victory for PASOK with 43.92% of the vote) followed just after, by the solemn announcement by Giorgos Papandreou of Greece's terrible deficit, leading into the era of memoranda and the electoral decline of PASOK.

In 2023, what appeared increasingly like a bad farce led to much more disorientation of many of the "people of the left": despite polls that suggested almost to the end a small possibility of a victory for Syriza, the results in May and June, with record abstention in the latter month, were not surprising. But above all, they were a terrible defeat for Syriza, which may not recover.

Towards the demise of Syriza?

Acknowledging the disastrous election results in the spring of 2023, Tsipras resigned as Syriza's president in June of that year. Instead of convening an extraordinary congress, the Syriza leadership launched the procedure for the election of the post of president, in the same form as the previous year, with no one officially questioning an even more problematic procedure in these circumstances. On the contrary, it was given very wide publicity - after the electoral shock, it was a question of proving that Syriza still has a wide echo in society, even if it meant getting anyone to register to vote (for two euros), including right-wing cadres (as has been seen).

Several candidates put themselves forward, including three members of the party leadership and a former PASOK cadre. The fifth candidate was an unknown, Stéfanos Kasselákis, a recent member, who had been a parliamentary candidate on behalf of overseas Greeks. However, at the end of an American-style campaign led by this US-based citizen, and after the "contract" had been fulfilled (again about 150,000 voters, including almost 40,000 new members), it was Kasselákis who won by a wide margin (56%) in the second round against the favourite, former employment minister Effie Achtsióglou.

The surprise was immense and general, and even today we debate the reasons for this success. The opening of the poll to anyone who wanted to register obviously played a role, but not to the point of "sabotaging" the election. The three former leaders in the running paid for their entrenchment in increasingly bureaucratic functioning and were cut off from Syriza's struggles between 2019 and 2023. Even if the current of former Finance Minister Euclid Tsakalotos claims to be on the left, it has supported like the others Syriza's course towards a non-existent centre-left. Kasselakis, a darling of the media and certainly of ND, was able to win thanks to at least three elements. The first is that he presented himself as a "new man," not having dabbled in the politics of the memorandums. The second is that he is openly gay, which is a political criterion in a Greece where Mitsotakis does everything to prevent gay marriage, denounced as diabolical by the Orthodox Church and the extreme right of ND. And the third factor in this victory is quite simply that part of the Syriza apparatus very quickly played the Kasselakis card, whether the technocrat Nikos Pappás or the populist Pávlos Polákis, perhaps with hopes on their part of being able to manipulate the new president.

In any case, Syriza suddenly finds itself with a new president that bears no relation to its brief history (and the long history of the former KKEs), and we will see that more than two months after this election, the result was a crisis that

may be fatal for the party. Indeed, Kasselakis is really a “new man”: an executive of a major bank in the United States, he was not long ago publishing praise for Mitsotakis, and it is clear that he knows nothing about the left, his criteria being those of the company (he even admired Trump’s methods as a boss) and the market. And so he thinks he can act in Syriza like the boss of a company to be turned around, with declarations denying the functioning of the party: he wants to “reward” the cadres who will work for the coherence of the “common objectives”, he has already tried to have sanctions voted by referendum against members in open opposition, with the declared desire to “dialogue” with the rank and file by going over the party instances.

If he makes many grand declarations, they are of a distressing banality (“we must make policies by placing the human being at the centre”) but also of a disturbing megalomania (only he can beat Mitsotakis on this ground), and they do not hide the problem that is now flagrant for many: Kasselákis has no knowledge of what the left is. Rushing for interviews that delight the right-wing media or conferences (including employers’ conferences), he notably clarified his dream: “I think what I bring back is a return to the Greece of yesteryear as a well-kept house. A Greece where the owner kept the house clean, observed the rules and laws, had interest and empathy for his neighbour.” These words bring him dangerously close to those who are nostalgic for the police or dictatorial regimes of Greece in the past. Moreover, he keeps contradicting himself, saying that he is not bothered by the existence of different points of view in the party, but that tendencies (which are guaranteed by the statutes) must be banned. Or first approving Mitsotakis who was angry with the British Prime Minister about the Parthenon marbles taken at the beginning of the 19th century by the Scottish lord Elgin and then, after advice, criticizing him because Mitsotakis did not actually negotiate the definitive return of these marbles to the Acropolis Museum.

The result of this strange election and Kasselakis' first two months as president are dramatic: within Syriza, many voices criticize the authoritarian behaviour and political vacuum of this UFO, and even his entourage of “loyalists” often tries to reframe him, in an attempt to make people believe that the character is competent and left-wing. On the political line, it is difficult to know where Syriza is going: beyond the proclamations about the objective of obtaining 17% in the European elections and of “once again becoming the leading party of the left and the progressive movement”, it can be understood that the objective of the new president is increasingly that of a party of the “centre”, modelled on the American Democratic Party. What is certain is that a Stalinist reorientation operation is underway, whether at the newspaper *Avgi* or Radio Kokkino, the media linked to Syriza, from which several journalists have left or been dismissed.

Splits in Syriza

But the most serious and most interesting consequence for the time being is the departure from Syriza of thousands of members, cadres and activists on the ground. Entire sectors (cities, youth and so on) are announcing their departure. And two currents have officially left a party that they consider irretrievable given its new functioning: the first is Ombrella, which brings together around Tsakalotos a large number of well-known historical cadres. Recently, the 6+6 current around Effie Achtsióglou did the same thing, with the two currents joining to form a new parliamentary group, Nea Aristera (New Left), of 11 deputies, which aims to organize some of the activists leaving Syriza.

Recent polls seem to condemn the Kasselakis operation: Syriza is given between 10% and 12% and comes third behind Pasok, the fifth poll giving it 14%, 2 points ahead of Pasok. So, what does the future hold for Syriza? We can imagine the worst: even if the leadership claims that the declared departures concern only 1% of the membership, this 1% represents an activist fabric, with a political experience that is not that of the very many remaining or newly registered members of Syriza. Above all, many members simply do not let it be known that they will no longer have anything to do with a Syriza that is now unrelated to their former party. Among the activists who remain, a good part disagrees with the “Kasselákis line” but remain there for the moment out of “party patriotism,” waiting for a congress

that is constantly postponed. Their continued membership of Syriza is a factor that allows the party's survival for the time being. The prospect of a Syriza that is both radical and "realistic", advocated by some cadres who want to mask Kasselakis' "democratic party" course, illustrates both the malaise and - with the pitiful reminder of the radical accents of yesteryear - a vain attempt to combine two totally opposite political paths on the ground, the choice having long been made to move towards ever more "realism", that is to say, of management subject to big capital.

The other major question is that of the possible reorganisation of the currents that have emerged from Syriza, in which, according to the polls, a good part of the former voters places their hopes. This reorganisation presupposes the definition of a clear political line that breaks with following the Tsipras version of the "progressive pole" project of past years. But even if Tsakalotos claims to be a Marxist, there is no reason to say that we are moving towards a more left-wing course. It is also the evolution of the rest of the left that will weigh on the future direction. For the time being, the group's spokesperson, Alexis Haritsis, has set out to "give left-wing answers" to social emergencies such as "the high cost of living, the collapse of the institutions of the rule of law, the climate crisis, the rise in inequality." These are themes that the group wishes to highlight by bringing together various forces, "political ecology, social movements and the defence of democratic institutions." Is this a return to Syriza's previous aims, after having participated in the long years of management and the turn towards social liberalism? This is highly doubtful, given the profile as managers of the eleven MEPs and their respect for "European rules." But in any case, it would be a mistake not to take an interest in this approach, for the time being parliamentary, which could be changed if the arrival of the former Syriza activists - who the anti-capitalist left must know how to address - weighs in to reorient a little more to the left.

To conclude this overview of Syriza's situation, we can say that its new line completes the bankruptcy of an organization in which a majority of young people and workers in Greece and a large part of the European anti-capitalist left had placed their hopes and illusions, which for our part we did not share. Not out of sectarianism, but out of clearheadedness about the ability of the unconditionally reformist majority to manoeuvre and the need to sustain an anti-capitalist left independent of Syriza. Let us add a final question, very often asked: what is the project of Tsipras who, not content with having taken on the management of capitalism and having himself chosen Kasselákis as his candidate in the parliamentary elections, did not intervene during the campaign to elect his successor while dirty tricks were being used against the candidate Achtsióglou, obviously coming from the populist wing promoting Kasselakis? His only recent intervention is to condemn the splits, covering up what is in fact a scuttling of Syriza.

What's new on the left of Syriza?

If we look at the electoral results, the result is almost irrevocable: in eight years, the groups or parties to the left of Syriza have benefited in little or no way from Syriza's betrayal and refocusing on social liberalism. And this is particularly evident for the years 2019-2023, a period when Syriza dug its own grave: this applies to groups that emerged from Syriza as well as to those of different origins (the KKE seems to be rising slightly in 2023). For all of them, the main reason for the failure is twofold: an erroneous analysis and a shopkeeper's logic, the opposite of which could have avoided what is a disaster for the entire left. The erroneous analysis focuses on Syriza, which is placed by all these groups on the same level as ND or Pasok, whereas the 2019 vote showed that young people and workers made a strong difference. For the past four years, and especially in the election period, Syriza seemed to represent for these groups the enemy to be defeated, and this certainly helped to strengthen the right.

The failure to strengthen itself at the expense of Syriza also stems from the historical disease of most of the Greek left: its sectarianism. For not only has the left, from Mera to Antarsya to the KKE, focused its attacks on Syriza, but each group did so for its own benefit, where offering a common alternative could have been effective. And this appears in most demonstrations, where the gatherings of the diverse groups or blocs take place in various places

and sometimes at different times. The result of all this is that at the end of the "Syriza period", everything to its left represents about 550,000 votes, or 10.5% to 11% of the votes cast in June 2023. The gain in 2023, against the backdrop of Syriza's collapse, was about 150,000 votes compared to January 2015, when neither Mera, nor LAE, nor Plevsi existed, which is exceptionally low if we remember the significance of the social struggles of recent years. At the same time, for the struggles and political recomposition that are bound to come, it is a potential that can be described as encouraging. Providing these left-wing forces reconsider their position and objectives as quickly as possible, which is unfortunately not a foregone conclusion.

As for the KKE, we certainly see an electoral gain, since it is up by around 100,000 votes since 2019. Its leadership presented this victory as a great success, proof of the correctness of its line which, despite very small openings in the electoral period, is above all made up of self-assertion and division (especially in the trade union movement, with its PAME faction) with an apparently left-wing discourse ("Only the people can save the people, with a powerful KKE") but whose translation is electoral: to start changing things, we have to wait for the people to give the majority to the KKE. And there is only one thing to do: to build the KKE (its youth organization, the KNE, was largely rebuilt after its virtual disappearance in favour of NAR in 1989), by establishing a cordon sanitaire vis-à-vis the other forces of the left.

Does the 2023 score represent a success for this tactic? We can only doubt this if we look back at the 2009 legislative elections, where it did much better: 536,000 votes (8.48%); similarly, in the large city of Patras, where the KKE mayor Kostas Peletidis is in his third term, we see in the municipal elections the erosion of the classic "municipal communism" of reformist management: elected in the second round in 2014 with 60,000 votes (63.5%) and in 2019 with 55,000 (70.8%), he has just been re-elected, but with only 41,000 votes (56.7%). What will be the position of the KKE in the face of Syriza's crisis? Will it understand that there is an urgent need to propose a broad and unitary approach to the members and activists who criticize Kasselakis' course? The initial answers seem to show that the KKE remains firm in its shopkeeper's logic. Sofianos, one of their leaders, said: "All these people must be with us. It doesn't matter if we don't agree on everything, it doesn't matter if we disagree on a lot of things." It seems that the KKE, imperturbable in its conviction that it is right, on its own, does not want to take the measure of the crisis on the left in the face of the generalized offensive of the right.

Ex-Syriza organizations at an impasse

As far as the three forces that emerged from Syriza are concerned, their particular evolutions have been very different: LAE, after leaving Syriza in the summer of 2015 with the sole line of denouncing its treacherous leadership, very quickly retreated into a course demanding above exit from the European Union and the euro, which quite quickly led it to a nationalist position and a haemorrhage in terms of activists and audiences. Mera has seen some development thanks to the fame of former minister Yannis Varoufakis, whose refusal to follow Tsipras in his reneging on the 2015 referendum had brought him a certain prestige. While Mera activists can be found in some of the mobilizations, the technocratic aspect of its leader and the confused nature of its political project have not helped to clarify the left. As for Plevsi, after creating itself as an identified left-wing group and working in collaboration with the movement Den Plirono ("I don't pay" tolls), it has truly degenerated into a kind of cult around the former president of the parliament, Zoé Konstantopoúlou, acting almost as an authoritarian guru and alternating nationalist declarations and words of love that have seduced a depoliticized and reactionary electorate since it surprisingly obtained eight deputies. Thus, it no longer has anything to do with debates on the left.

But what about the anti-capitalist left, represented for years by the Antarsya coalition, whose launch in 2009 had raised many hopes in Greece, since a good part of the radical and revolutionary left was thus trying to move up a gear, after various initial experiences confined to the electoral field alone? From its foundation, it was based, unlike for example the NPA in France, launched as a desire to broaden and go beyond the LCR alone, on two major forces

of the revolutionary left: on the one hand NAR and its newspaper *Prin*, emerging in 1989 from the majority split of the communist youth KNE, and on the other SEK, a member of the International Socialist Tendency, each with several hundred activists. Alongside them, several groups were involved, including the Greek section of the Fourth International, which at the time was a single group.

Very quickly, the electoral results showed a distortion – which should have been perceived as problematic – between the results of the national and local elections: in the parliamentary elections, apart from a score of 75,500 votes (1.19%) in May 2012, Antarsya never reached 1%. In new parliamentary elections in June 2012, it fell to 20,500 votes (0.33%), while Syriza went from 1 million votes (16.79%) to 1.7 million (26.89%). And since then, as the table shows, Antarsya has stagnated at very low national scores. On the other hand, in the various municipal or regional elections, Antarsya often scored more than 2% and elected councillors in many regions. It can be argued that the main reason for this discrepancy is above all the central position of Antarsya, which instead of a critical position in relation to Syriza, presented it from the outset as a force at the service of the bourgeoisie, and immediately denounced the Tsipras government, putting it in the same bag as ND and Pasok. Without understanding the relationship of the masses to what was not the first left-wing government in Greece (Andreas Papandreou's Pasok was much more radical in 1981) but which nevertheless raised hopes, if not of a radical break with the bourgeois order, at least for social advances calling into question the deadly logic of the memorandums. On the other hand, at the local level, Antarsya activists are recognized for their permanent involvement in a number of struggles of anti-racists, students, workers and local collectives.

But the obvious failure at the national level accentuated a key original flaw: Antarsya defined itself as a coalition, so those who wanted to be activists without being members of an established group could not find a place in it. Over the years, these various difficulties have accentuated a fatal tendency: for NAR and for SEK in particular, Antarsya's interest was to recruit for their respective groups, especially since there was no question of the coalition allowing them to “overtake” each of the groups. For several years, Antarsya has become a mere electoral grouping, and, in fact, it has broken up. Not only is it common to see in Athenian demonstrations two separate banners for Antarsya, one of SEK, the other of NAR, but in several local elections, such as the regional ones in the Athenian region, there were two lists claiming to be from Antarsya.

Under these conditions, in the Athens municipal elections this autumn, the successful campaign around the well-known anti-fascist lawyer Kostas Papadákis, an activist from Antarsya and candidate of a broad and unitary list that won 6.09%, is both an exception (in the regional elections in the same region, it took 3% to obtain a councillor but each of the two competing lists only got a little more than 2%) and shows the potential that still exists at the local level. As long as the anti-capitalist left also establishes its own balance sheet and revises its project from top to bottom.

For the moment, this is not what seems to be taking shape, NAR have been engaged for quite some time in a vast debate on the future party of which it would be the nucleus, and SEK is active as always in various strict fronts that are emanations of its group.

So, in relation to the social and political emergencies, in relation to the need to defeat Mitsotakis, we can hope that from the current slump in the anti-capitalist left, which is reflected in splits and regroupments, there will perhaps be born a political perspective of patient but solid construction of what Antarsya could not be: a broad anti-capitalist regroupment, rejecting sectarianism, and endowed with a compass that the Greek left is sorely lacking, the need to propose united fronts to the entire left in parallel with the discussion of the political project of an anti-capitalist force.

The ability to rebuild

As the left fragments, an urgent reorientation is needed in Greece

It seems that today almost everyone has understood that, beyond the rout of Syriza in the spring of 2023, it is the entire left that has suffered a worrying defeat, and this opens up possibilities for discussions within the anti-capitalist left. This can be seen in particular with the example of the Anametrissi group, a large part of which comes from Syriza or NAR, and in which one of the two groups that now form the Greek section of the Fourth International, the Fourth International Programmatic Tendency, is active. For the latter, at the heart of the upcoming discussions on the project on the left, another compass must also be put forward: international solidarity against imperialism, whether in support of the Palestinian people (the anti-fascist and anti-imperialist demonstrations of 17 November were a striking demonstration of this) but also of the Ukrainian people, whose resistance to Russian imperialism remains largely misunderstood by the majority of organizations of the reformist and revolutionary left, who remained on a campist position.

It goes without saying that such reactionary conceptions rule out the possibility of involving the KKE in the programmatic discussions that are opening or will open in view of the European elections, for which the presentation of a single and open list of the anti-capitalist left could be an important step. But the constitution and echo of such a list will be all the more possible if this left will systematically be able to initiate proposals for action to the entire left, against the policy of misery and repression of Mitsotakis and his party.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.