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Greek debate

Greece, SYRIZA in Power, and the Concept of a "Workers' Government"

- Debate - Perspectives in Greece -

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International Viewpoint has published a compilation of articles on [Greece and the failure of SYRIZA](#). In the present comment I want to deal mainly with the contribution by Alan Thornett, titled [The capitulation of Tsipras leadership and the role of "left europeanism"](#). We will look, in particular, at Thornett's assertion that the SYRIZA government was, at least potentially, an example of a "workers' government" as that concept was developed by the Comintern in a set of theses adopted at its third congress in 1922. I will assert that Thornett's approach reflects both a misunderstanding of the Comintern's text and a disorientation regarding the SYRIZA government itself. [1]

Let's start our investigation, however, with a quote from a different article that IV includes in the same collection, the one by Catarina Prãncipe and Dan Russell titled [Asking the Right Questions](#). Prãncipe and Russell directly express the same disorientation as Thornett regarding the tasks of revolutionaries in Greece in 2015: "Those of us who don't have to confront the question of state power just yet nonetheless must learn the right lessons both from SYRIZA and the history from which it was born."

I would say, however, that we cannot even begin to "ask the right questions," let alone "learn the right lessons," until we realize that starting in January 2015, immediately after winning the election, the key confrontation that SYRIZA had to engage was, precisely, with "the question of state power" specifically with the nature and limitations of the governmental power that had come into its hands, and therefore with the need to construct an alternative power based on a mobilized mass movement in order to fulfill the campaign promises that Tsipras had made to the people of Greece.

In a sense, of course, "the question of state power" is one that revolutionaries confront at all times in one way or another, even in activities like a strike, or a campaign to free political prisoners. But I will insist that SYRIZA faced this question immediately and acutely, as soon as the election results became known in Greece last January.

A collective error

All of the contributions compiled by the IV editors follow a consistent pattern of thought, reflecting this same general disorientation: What went wrong in Greece, we are told, is that Alexis Tsipras failed to pursue the right governmental policies after the January 2015 election. I disagree, though it is true that Tsipras failed to pursue the right policies.

What went wrong in Greece was, instead, that both Tsipras and the left opposition within SYRIZA approached their tasks as if the governmental power that came into Tsipras's hands in January was the key and decisive tool to wage an anti-austerity struggle against the EU, disagreeing merely about what specific administrative steps the government itself should or should not take. Both Tsipras and his critics within SYRIZA failed to engage the reality just identified: that as soon as a governmental coalition was created in January, SYRIZA then had to "confront the question of state power" in a very real and immediate sense.

The governmental power that came into Tsipras's hands was at best only a blunt instrument. The real hope was to develop a struggle which could transcend and overwhelm the limitations imposed on any government by the realities of the Greek bourgeois state and its relationship to the European Union. The importance of mass mobilization gets honorable mention in the contributions compiled by IV. But it is, clearly, conceived in these articles as a supplement

to the actions that Tsipras might have taken as head of state. A proper conception of tasks, however, would be the reverse.

Although I disagree with the rejection by OKDE-Spartakos (Greek section of the Fourth International) of an electoral bloc between ANTARSYA and Popular Unity in September, their statement explaining this rejection ([OKDE-Spartakos statement on the upcoming elections](#)) does in fact nail the political essence of the problem by pointing out "what led to the total devotion of SYRIZA to the memoranda and the euro: governmentalism, management and reform of the state."

And this observation by OKDE leads directly to our discussion about Alan Thornett's conception, or misconception, of a "workers' government." Thornett writes as if the Communist International, in 1922, was approaching things from the same vantage point as PrÃ-ncipe and Russell in 2015: elaborating a process whereby such a government might take office through electoral means and then use its position as a tool to advance the interests of the masses without directly "confront[ing] the question of state power." But "governmentalism, management and reform of the state" was not the agenda of the Third International. The Comintern was, actually, focused on a completely different question: How to seize control of the government and then use that control as a tool to actively "confront the bourgeois state" itself, with the goal of overthrowing bourgeois power and replacing it with a different kind of state power.

Thornett writes:

We have argued, throughout the crisis and confrontation in Greece, that the situation posed by it raised the possibility of a workers' government. A government which, though taking office through a parliamentary election (with capitalism still intact), would act consistently in the interests of the working class even if that meant taking actionsâ€"in order to defend itself and implement its programmeâ€"that would be contrary to the capitalist mode of production and take it in a socialist direction. It was uncharted waters but it was a clear possibility.

This did not happen because the SYRIZA leadership capitulated on its key demandâ€"in fact its rationale for existenceâ€"which was to oppose austerity.

Not quite. This did not happen because the government that was elected in January attempted to maneuver within the agreed-upon confines of bourgeois power relations, rather than to create and then rely on alternative institutions of power. Alexis Tsipras, holding as tightly as anyone might have hoped to his anti-austerity agenda, could not have acted in the way Thornett proposes without consciously and actively promoting the development of an alternative state power in Greece, at least in embryo. There was no possibility for the anti-austerity struggle to gain ground without a self-organized mass movement from below, one that would begin to pose a threat to the bourgeois state itself. This, and only this, could have forced genuine concessions from the EU.

The Tsipras government consciously chose a different path, however, a path of negotiations at the top that turned the masses into passive bystanders. Although there is a feedback loop of cause and effect at work here, I would tend to say that the chain starts at a point which is the opposite of the one Thornett identifies. Tsipras did not fail to create a workers' government because he abandoned his commitment to the struggle against austerity. He abandoned the struggle against austerity because there was no other choice if he conceived of his task as "governmentalism, management and reform of the state"â€"that is, if he could not conceive of creating a genuine workers' government.

Thornett continues:

The debate around the formation of such a government (effectively a provisional government) under such conditions is not new, of course. It was discussed by the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1922, after the immediate

revolutionary wave generated by the Russian revolution had receded and the Comintern had to come to terms with the reality that the struggle was going to be a much longer one and that struggles for power would not necessarily follow the soviet model.

The proposition advanced by the Comintern was that such a government—elected to office with capitalism still existing—could be the vehicle for developments beyond the limitations of capitalism, despite the restrictions which capitalism would attempt to impose on it—irrespective of whether the leadership of such a government saw itself as playing such a role when it was elected to office. In other words it would be a transitional government.

This is not bad so far as it goes. But it stops short of the question that was actually at the heart of the theoretical work being done by the Communist International in 1922. The Third international did not conceive of a “workers’ government” coming to power and then, through the administrative process of that government, advancing the interests of the masses without overthrowing capitalism. It was, instead, interested in a different process: how to move from a workers’ government of this type, if it ever does come to power, to a genuine revolutionary government based on a revolutionary state. Thornett’s description ends with the formation of the “transitional government.” For the Comintern, however, that is where the most interesting and crucial work begins. It developed the document we are considering for the sole purpose of thinking through how communists might use the “workers’ government” in order to promote a genuine transition to a communist dictatorship.

The perspective of the Comintern

Thornett quotes the Communist International theses as they describe the reality in question. But he fails to make a distinction that is crucial if our goal is to understand what the words he cites were actually trying to say:

The resolution on tactics at the Third Congress of the Comintern said the following. In fact it could have been written for the Greek situation today:

“As a general propagandistic slogan, the workers’ government (or workers’ and peasants’ government [where peasants exist]) can be used almost anywhere. As an immediate political slogan, however, the workers’ government is most important in countries where bourgeois society is particularly unstable, where the relationship of forces between the workers’ parties and the bourgeoisie places the question of government on the agenda as a practical problem requiring immediate solution. In these countries, the slogan of the workers’ government flows unavoidably from the entire united-front tactic.”

It goes on: “Such a workers’ government is possible only if it is born from the struggles of the masses themselves and is supported by militant workers’ organisations created by the most oppressed layers of the working masses. Even a workers’ government that arises from a purely parliamentary combination, that is, one that is purely parliamentary in origin, can provide the occasion for a revival of the revolutionary workers’ movement. Obviously, the birth and continued existence of a genuine workers’ government, one that pursues revolutionary policies, must result in a bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie, and possible civil war. Even an attempt by the proletariat to form such a workers’ government will encounter from the outset the most determined resistance from the bourgeoisie. The slogan of the workers’ government thus has the potential of uniting the proletariat and unleashing the revolutionary struggle.”

Note that these two paragraphs from the Comintern text are talking about two different things. The first (the one that does, indeed, sound like the Greek situation in 2015) is merely considering the question of slogans. The second, however, is describing a “workers’ government” not as a slogan, though it does refer to the slogan in its last sentence, but as an actual government that might come to power because communists raise this slogan. It is striking

that the reality described in the second paragraph is not at all like Greece in 2015. There was no “workers’ government . . . pursu[ing] revolutionary policies,” and no “bitter struggle with the bourgeoisie” unless someone believes that the negotiations between Tsipras and the EU can properly be characterized in that way. We had only the potential/acute need for such a struggle. There was certainly not a “possible civil war.” The mass actions that might have pushed things in that direction had already receded.

The SYRIZA government arose “from a parliamentary combination,” but it did not “provide the occasion for a revival of the revolutionary workers’ movement.” Quite the opposite occurred, in fact. The masses in Greece, after the January election, chose for the most part to simply await results that the government promised to bring about without a struggle, through a process of negotiation.

If Thornett had said, simply, that the conditions in Greece were consistent with raising the slogan, or idea, of a “workers’ government” that would have been true enough, and in keeping with the thinking of the Comintern. But when he asserts that the same two words can be used as a descriptive characterization for the actual government that was formed by Tsipras and SYRIZA—even as a potential for what the SYRIZA government might have been—he and the Third International have parted ways. The institutions of mass struggle that a “workers’ government” of this type requires simply were not present. Neither Tsipras nor any wing of SYRIZA had the perspective of working for their development as their primary task.

It now becomes possible to directly identify Thornett’s key error of assessment: “We have argued, throughout the crisis and confrontation in Greece, that the situation posed by it raised the possibility of a workers’ government.” That’s wrong, since “possibility” here clearly does not mean “extremely remote possibility” but something closer to “tendency to push in the direction of.” There was, in fact, no such tendency at work. There was only an extremely remote possibility. Yet it is clear that Thornett pins all of his hopes on precisely that most-unlikely turn of events:

Although the Tsipras leadership had begun to compromise on its programme as soon as it was in office (and even before), the Syriza Government retained the potential to move radically to the left whilst it maintained its anti-austerity stance.

Costas Lapavistas offers the same thought in another piece published by IV as part of its collection ([Awakening the European Left](#)), telling us that Tsipras might have jumped the right way “when the real class issues were put on the table.” (They weren’t on the table in January??!!) This possibility was still in play, Lapavistas suggests, “until the week after the referendum.”

Perhaps. Such a development is certainly not excluded theoretically. But it was, as just noted, extremely remote. And I cannot imagine the Comintern ever proposing a policy that depended for its success on which way a particular head of state might jump. No, I will be so bold as to assert that the Communist International would have advocated an active policy to help push the working-class movement itself to jump the right way, regardless of what any particular leader chose to do. This, by itself, suggests that Lapavistas and Thornett share a perspective that has little in common with that of the Communist International in 1922.

A government with a reformist strategy doesn’t spontaneously transform itself into a workers’ government of the type we are discussing—at least not very often. Such a possibility is, therefore, not one we ought to expect or plan for. It should have been clear from the outset that the Tsipras government was a reformist government with a reformist strategy, and this realization should have guided the orientation of revolutionaries—rather than a hope and a prayer that events would somehow push Tsipras to suddenly become the class-struggle leader he has never been.

Revolutionary goals: 1922 and today

As we have already noted, the Comintern's theses were intended to prepare a cadre for the necessary struggle within and with any government of this type that might arise "in order to guarantee an actual transition to a genuine proletarian state. The Third International was not attempting to develop a strategy for the class struggle in the context of capitalist society. We can now take our examination of this one step further, because the Communist International in 1922 also understood that this transitional form could, in fact, not be relied on to solve the immediate crisis of working-class self-defense. In and by itself it was completely inadequate.

Here is what the Comintern theses have to say:

Despite its great advantages, the slogan of a workers' government also has its dangers, just as any united-front tactic has. As a precaution against these dangers, the Communist parties should not lose sight of the fact that although every bourgeois government is at the same time a capitalist government, it is not true that every workers' government is actually proletarian, that is a revolutionary instrument of proletarian power.

The Communist International should anticipate the following possibilities:

- 1) A liberal workers' government. There is already a government of this sort in Australia; there may also be one before very long in England.
- 2) A Social-Democratic workers' government (Germany).
- 3) A workers' and peasants' government. This is possible in the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, etc.
- 4) A workers' government in which Communists participate.
- 5) A genuine proletarian workers' government which, in its purest form, can only be represented by the Communist Party.

The first two types of workers' government are not revolutionary workers' governments but rather governments that camouflage a coalition between the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary leaders of the working class.

...

Communists are prepared to march with workers . . . who have not yet recognized the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Under certain circumstances and with certain guarantees, the Communists are equally prepared to support a non-Communist workers' government. But the communists must at all costs explain to the working class that its liberation can only be assured by the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The other two types of workers' government (number 3 and 4 in the above list "SB) are types that the Communists can participate in, although they still do not represent the dictatorship of the proletariat; they do not represent a necessary form of transition toward the dictatorship, but they can serve as a point of departure for attaining this dictatorship. The full dictatorship of the proletariat can only be accomplished by a workers' government composed of communists."

The reader should note two points in particular in this passage:

"Communists must, at all costs, explain to the working class that its liberation can only be assured by the dictatorship

of the proletariat.”

A workers' government that is not yet a proletarian dictatorship can, nonetheless, “serve as a point of departure for attaining this dictatorship.” That’s the reason Communists are willing to participate in and support a “workers’ government” which is based on the reality of an alternative state in embryo, or on the attempt to create such an alternative state. This reality of an alternative state in embryo (or the potential for it), on which the workers’ government attempts to rely, is what gives it the character of a transitional government, not any specific governmental policy.

Thus we can see once again that the entire focus of the Communist International in adopting these theses was “the question of state power,” of creating a proletarian dictatorship. It was never how to advance the interests of the working class and oppressed in the absence of any struggle to create a proletarian state.

The Greek people should never have been dependent on which way Alexis Tsipras, left to his own devices, decided to jump. The primary task was to encourage the struggle itself to jump the right way—leaving Alexis Tsipras behind if he refused to jump along with the mass movement. Like the Comintern in 1922, we, today, need to be focused on “the struggle for power” as something that we are directly and immediately concerned with, even if the transition to an actual proletarian state is not immediately on the agenda. That’s true both because the question of creating a proletarian state is the primary concern of the revolutionary movement, and because only a strategy that is focused on this concern can, in fact, lead to the kind of fight-back we need today in order to win concessions from the austerity-mongers, even within the context of bourgeois society.

If we think about time in a political sense, the socialist revolution is further off today than it was in 1922 when the Comintern considered this question. That affects many things in terms of our tactics and strategy. But it does not change the most fundamental thing: that a revolutionary policy must have the goal of pursuing revolution, of bringing it closer by our actions today even when we cannot make revolution today.

Thornett actually describes the kind of struggle that would have been needed in Greece to bring revolution closer:

Such a strategy would depend on an interaction between the mass movement in the work places and on the street where the mass movement pushes its representatives within government to implement an escalating series of radical demands that would in turn empower the mass movement. Demands which, however moderate (or reasonable) they may seem in themselves, will run up against the limits of that which capital will allow. It is from this process that institutions of workers democracy can emerge.

The point is, however, that this level of struggle does not happen, or at least not very often, without a conscious effort by some political cadre with sufficient critical mass and implantation in the class struggle to make it happen. When the cadre sit back instead, waiting to see which way a particular leader might jump, nothing is likely to happen.

Conclusion

I am not among those who believe that if the Communist International suggested a certain course of action in 1922, we today must slavishly adhere to that same course of action. I repeat: much has changed since 1922, both in the world and in our understanding of it. But if we are going to cite the perspectives of the Comintern to defend a particular policy we have an obligation to be accurate in our assertions, and thorough in our understanding.

I could not agree more with Thornett’s conclusion:

A wide discussion on all this could hardly be more urgent. Politics is becoming more volatile across Europe. The crisis remains unresolved. Austerity is being forced in relentlessly. Jeremy Corbin’s election as Labour leader is a

reflection of this. Whether it is Podemos in Spain or some broad based party that does not yet exist there will be more parties with a mass radicalisation behind them, that will be thrown into this situation and will face all these problems and challenges all over again.

The European workers movement cannot afford another debacle such as the one that had been created in Greece by the leadership of SYRIZA.

But another debacle cannot be avoided by tinkering around the edges of a policy that believes victory in a bourgeois election can lead to seizing control of the government without "having to confront the question of state power just yet." Political formations like SYRIZA, or Podemos in Spain, or the British Labor Party under Jeremy Corbyn, will only succeed if they break definitively with trying to work out some favorable arrangement without directly challenging the capitalist system, begin to engage, objectively even if not yet consciously, in an immediate confrontation with the bourgeois state itself.

If a working-class party succeeds in gaining governmental power before the capitalist state is overthrown, the only truly meaningful action it can take is (in the words of Michael Lebowitz at [socialist project](#), discussing precisely this same set of events) "to use its power as government . . . to support the development of a new state from below."

In the absence of that, all the rest is only wishful thinking.

October 2015

[Old and new project](#)

[1] In this piece I use a term I have, generally, banished from my personal vocabulary for the 21st century: "dictatorship of the proletariat." I do so because we are confronted with the challenge of understanding a text from 1922, in which that term appears. The document in question is cited by Alan Thornett (and others, I might add) in defense of a specific theoretical approach toward recent events in Greece. Though Thornett does not quote that part of the Comintern's document where it refers to the "dictatorship of the proletariat," I will, because it is a key portion if we want to comprehend the question that was actually being addressed. I ask readers to keep in mind that in 1922 the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" meant, simply, a revolutionary state based on democratic working-class power. It was conceived as a "dictatorship" of the working class as a whole, over the capitalist class as a whole, not a dictatorship of some individual, or "vanguard party" over society. This latter conception is a meaning of "communist dictatorship" which was inconceivable before Stalin consolidated his personal totalitarian rule in the USSR beginning in the mid 1920s.