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The “Workers’ Government,” The Communist International, and the Greek Elections

by Steve Bloom

[Note: This article deals with a theoretical conception that has been variously referred to in Marxist discourse as “a workers’ government,” a “workers’ and peasants’ government” and a “workers’ and farmers’ government.” All three of these terms appear below. Speaking in my own name I prefer to use “workers’ and farmers’ government,” because I think it’s important to capture the idea that this institutional reality must be based on alliances, not some exclusive process that involves only “workers,” also because the term “peasant” is not the one most people use to talk about this social layer in the USA. When I quote others, however, it will usually be “workers’ government” or “workers’ and peasants’ government” to reflect their usage. The reader should keep in mind that this difference is purely terminological. It does not reflect any substantive political distinction.]

January 31, 2015— The 2015 Greek election has thrilled the world. An entire nation stands up today, for once, and shakes its fist at the imperial monster saying: “our lives are more important than your profit.” It’s a good feeling. And it feels good to feel good for a change.

But we cannot allow ourselves to *simply* feel good. We also have to prepare for what is coming next: the attempt which the imperial monster will initiate to punish the people of Greece for their effrontery. This is a powerful beast, with many sharp talons in its claws, many weapons at its disposal—economic, political, and (if all else fails) military weapons. The imperialist rulers are experienced in using all of these weapons, and they use them with the arrogance of a social force that expects to win, because they are used to winning.

We are not used to winning but we do have the power to win if we can develop a winning strategy. Such a strategy is unlikely to emerge, however, unless we concern ourselves in a *rigorous* way with the lessons that can be derived from all of the defeats we have suffered (and the few victories) over the last 100 years.

In the January 20 issue of *Socialist Worker*, Lee Sustar attempts to defend a particular orientation toward the Greek election (then in the future) by citing the theoretical concept of a “workers’ government” as it was discussed in the 1920s by the Communist International (<http://socialistworker.org/2015/01/20/the-world-is-watching-greece>):

In the years following the Russian Revolution, there was a valuable discussion of the prospects for just such a development in the Communist International. . . . This debate centered on whether revolutionary socialists should participate in a workers’ government

—that is, a government of radical or revolutionary parties to the left of traditional social democratic parties.

The debates at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International . . . focused on how workers who were not yet prepared to take power by revolutionary means could nevertheless give their electoral support to workers' parties. Antonis Davanellos, a leading figure in DEA and in SYRIZA's Left Platform, discussed the relevance of that debate in today's Greece:

The criteria for its program must be bound—mostly or exclusively—to the needs of the working class and the popular classes, and not to some cross-class vague concepts such as "the country" or the "productive reconstruction of the economy." The criteria on its alliances must be confined to workers' parties and organizations, and not extend to broad alliances that sacrifice the clear sociopolitical orientation for the sake of parliamentary efficiency. The criteria on the prospects of a left-wing government must be understood as a transitional step towards socialist rupture, and not as a final destination that will "save the country."

The key question was what such left-wing parties will do in office to mobilize workers struggles against a hostile state bureaucracy and capitalist class, with strikes, factory occupations, sit-ins at government ministries and the like. Such struggles are essential to fortify revolutionary and working-class organization in what is certain to be a series of high-stakes confrontations with capital."

I agree with Sustar that the theoretical work done on this question by the Comintern has some relevance for our consideration of contemporary events in Greece. But his assertion that the Communist International was describing "just such a development" as the one taking place today is inaccurate. I note four important areas of difference:

- a) For the Comintern, an essential ingredient of the "workers' government" which communists could participate in was that it already rested on a level of independent mass mobilization, even a measure of what is called "dual power." It was never conceived as a purely parliamentary institution dependent for any and all power on the previously-existing structures of the bourgeois state itself.
- b) Thus the key question was not so much what the left-wing parties in power would do "to mobilize workers' struggles," since a high level of workers' struggle was considered to be a prerequisite to the formation of such a government in the first place. The primary question was, instead, how communists would urge the new government to base itself on, and also put itself at the disposal of, the workers' struggles that were already taking place, then use those struggles as a lever to advance the "workers' government" toward a program of genuine socialist revolution.
- c) The most important criterion for determining if communists could participate in a particular "workers' government" was not whether the forces that composed it were "to the left of traditional social-democratic parties" but whether the government did, in fact, rest on an institutional reality, such as "dual power," which would give it some genuine level of independence from the institutions of the bourgeois state.

d) And on a deeper level still, a second question was *at least* equally important for the Comintern as the one Sustar cites (*whether* communists should participate in the government). A portion of the Comintern text is therefore devoted to a discussion of *how* they should participate—in those situations where it was appropriate to do so.

We will briefly consider each of these issues below.

The Transitional Program

Before talking directly about the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, however, let's start with a look at the founding document of the Fourth International, adopted in 1938, titled "The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International"—popularly known ever since as "The Transitional Program." Without doubt this is the best-known discussion of the workers' and farmers' government in Marxist literature. It stands on the shoulders of the conversation in the Comintern that Sustar refers us to, reflecting the same political conceptions and conclusions.

The Transitional Program talks about two different meanings of this term. The first is considered only briefly, in the opening paragraph of this section:

This formula, 'workers' and peasants' government,' first appeared in the agitation of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and was definitely accepted after the October revolution. In the final instance it represented nothing more than the popular designation for the already-established dictatorship of the proletariat."

It's important, as we proceed with our examination below, to keep this use of "workers' and peasants' government" (simply a popular way of talking about the dictatorship of the proletariat) in mind. It is one very common use that we encounter often if, for example, we examine the writings of Lenin during and after 1917. But since this is not the sense of "workers' government" that Sustar is considering (no one, so far as I know, believes that the new Syriza government in Greece constitutes a revolutionary proletarian dictatorship) we will simply note it here and focus our attention on the second meaning of the same term, once again as it is discussed in the Transitional Program. This is, in fact, what the Transitional Program also spends most of its time on, and it is the meaning Sustar is actually calling to our attention. In this second sense, the call for a "workers' and peasant's government" represents the proposal for a governmental united front between Bolshevik forces and reformist leaderships of the working class, something that would not yet be a "proletarian dictatorship." That idea had to be considered—in Trotsky's view in 1938 and in the view of the Comintern in 1922—so long as reformist leaderships enjoyed the allegiance of the masses.

The example given in the Transitional Program of this variety of "workers' government" also comes from the Russian experience, but from the period *before* the Bolsheviks won hegemony in the Soviets and took power. Thus it is, clearly, not simply a popularization of the proletarian dictatorship, since nothing resembling the proletarian dictatorship

existed in Russia before the October insurrection. This second variety of "workers' government" is described as follows:

From April to September 1917, the Bolsheviks demanded that the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks break with the liberal bourgeoisie and take power into their own hands. Under this provision the Bolshevik Party promised the Mensheviks and the SRs, as the petty-bourgeois representatives of the workers and peasants, its revolutionary aid against the bourgeoisie. . . . If the Mensheviks and SRs had actually broken with the Cadets (liberals) and with foreign imperialism, then the 'workers' and peasants' government' created by them could only have hastened and facilitated the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it was exactly because of this that the leadership of petty-bourgeois democracy resisted with all possible strength the establishment of its own government. . . . Nevertheless, the demand of the Bolsheviks, addressed to the Mensheviks and SRs—'Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power into your own hands!'—had for the masses tremendous educational significance. The obstinate unwillingness of the Mensheviks and SRs to take power, so dramatically exposed during the July days, definitively doomed them before mass opinion and prepared the victory of the Bolsheviks.

What is key here, in terms of our conversation about Greece, is that the call for an independent working-class government in Russia during this period was dependent on the pre-existence of a form of dual power, the Soviets. It was this, and only this, that made it possible for the Bolsheviks to call on the Mensheviks and SRs to establish their own government and have that call serve the transitional function that is described in the above quote. In Greece today, however, there is no equivalent mass institution that can allow Syriza to exercise power with some reasonable degree of genuine independence from the bourgeois state. *Right now* a Syriza government can only be a *purely* bourgeois-parliamentary expression, whatever vision Syriza's left caucus offers us about how that reality might become something different in the future.

Yes, it is true, *If* the perspectives of the left are put into practice, *if* Syriza develops close ties to a remobilized mass movement, then this could well create the necessary independent base of support for the government—in an institutional, rather than just an electoral sense—making it possible to talk about the kind of "workers' government" described in the Transitional Program. But that's a very big "if." We are not there yet. I don't believe, therefore, that the government which is in the process of constituting itself as I write these lines, the government that Lee Sustar was actually referring to in his article, can reasonably be characterized as a "workers' government" in the sense that the Comintern was discussing in 1922.

Let's now turn to that conversation directly.

The Fourth Comintern Congress

As we can see from the passage of the Transitional Program just quoted, the idea of a "workers' and peasants' government" as a united-front government including Bolsheviks but actually led by reformist parties also has its origins in the Russian revolution. But it was not codified as a theoretical concept until 1922, at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern. We quote now from the resolution adopted by that congress:

The call for a workers' government (eventually a government of the peasants as well) should be raised everywhere as a general propaganda slogan. But as a slogan of present-day political activity, the call for a workers' government takes on its greatest importance in countries where the situation of bourgeois society is particularly unstable, where the relationship of forces between the workers' parties and the bourgeoisie puts on the agenda, as a political necessity, the solution to the question of a workers' government.

That does, on a casual reading, sound an awful lot like Greece in 2015. And yet the key question already posed after our look at the Transitional Program still suggests the need to make a distinction, because when the Comintern tells us that this call is most urgent in a "situation of bourgeois society [that] is particularly unstable" it was not thinking just, or even mostly, of a parliamentary instability, the kind we have at the moment in Greece, but one where the actual institutions of bourgeois rule (parliament most of all) were being directly challenged by an incipient proletarian power, such as the Soviets in Russia.

The Comintern resolution then proceeds to develop its thinking further, raising still another point which, it seems to me, has particular relevance for Greece today—and likewise leads to a conclusion that is quite different from Sustar's:

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 resolution discusses five types of governments that might be labeled "workers' governments," including those that are *not*, in fact, "revolutionary workers' governments, but rather governments that camouflage a coalition between the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary leaders of the working class." It is impossible for Bolsheviks to participate in any government of this type. But:

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 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 towards the dictatorship, but they can serve as a point of departure for attaining this dictatorship.

The quote from Antonis Davanellos, embedded in the quote above from Sustar, does make reference to this all-important requirement—that a workers' and farmers' government that is not yet the dictatorship of the proletariat must, in some way, be a potential "point of departure" for attaining the proletarian dictatorship before it is possible for communists to participate in it. Davanellos uses a more popular terminology,

but we assume he is saying more or less the same thing. And yet Davenellos's formulation of the problem lacks the full robustness of the Comintern's approach, because Davenellos is talking about how such a government "must be understood." The Comintern, by contrast, is talking about what it has to be.

I will still assert, therefore, that the left in Syriza, and Sustar in his *Socialist Worker* article, have not dealt adequately with this difficulty. It is completely insufficient to simply nod our heads in the direction of what is needed, to *say* that the Syriza government "must be understood as a transitional step towards socialist rupture, and not as a final destination that will 'save the country.'" The question then has to be posed: "Understood" by whom? And the answer is that it has to be "understood" by more than just a small caucus of active left supporters of Syriza. It has to become the prevailing trend, that a majority of those engaged in creating and supporting our "workers' government" are actively pushing for.

So the crucial task remains: to transform this into a predominant consciousness among the most active elements. Those, such as Davanellos, who are making these kinds of statements have to explain, therefore, *how they plan to engineer a transition* to this reality, from the present one—in which the forces within Syriza which do have a perspective of turning the new government into "a transitional step toward socialist rupture" remain a distinct minority, subordinate to more conservative forces which are actually setting the political agenda. At the very least, our left wing of Syriza has to do this if it also wants to consider itself in the tradition of the Communist International.

The 36 percent of the Greek population that voted for Syriza on January 25, the majority of Syriza's membership, and (most importantly) the core elements in its leadership, are all banking, precisely, on the idea that the new Syriza government is the "final destination that will 'save the country.'" "Will anyone dispute this assessment of popular consciousness? If genuine revolutionaries are going to turn the present Syriza government into something else, into a "point of departure for attaining the dictatorship of the proletariat," then the mechanisms for that transformation cannot be left to chance, to take care of themselves based on the "pressure of objective reality." The process has to be consciously conceived, planned, and struggled for. Yet unless I have missed it we do not get even the hint of a conscious program for *how* to achieve the necessary transformation in any of the discussions of strategy that come down to us from Syriza's left caucus.

We should note, finally, that this general difficulty raises still one more aspect of the Comintern's perspective which needs to be taken into account. There is another element, in addition to the existence of the Soviets, which gave the Bolshevik's call on the Mensheviks and SR's to take power, based on the Soviets, a transitional character in 1917: The existence of the Bolshevik party itself, which was willing to accept leadership and take power in its own name if the other workers' parties failed to do so. That's one reason why the question of *how* communists will participate in any workers' and farmers' government of the united-front type—constantly emphasizing the truth that a genuine liberation of the working class "can only be assured by the dictatorship of the

proletariat”—was such an important part of the text that was approved by the 4th Comintern congress. Without such a vanguard formation the transitional character of the call for a workers’ government disappears. It does not seem to me that either the Syriza left or the alternative coalition of Greek revolutionaries that is working today outside Syriza, called Anatarsya, is yet capable of playing this role—the first because it seems to lack any perspective that it needs to, the second because it is too weak.

An assessment of the Fourth Comintern Congress resolution, therefore, in relation to the program of the left in Syriza, does *not* suggest the conclusion drawn by Sustar: that we simply have a green light to proceed with the Syriza experiment. The actual words in the 1922 text suggest a far more cautious approach—a flashing yellow light, perhaps. I would tend to agree that conscious revolutionaries can, perhaps even should, work within Syriza to advance their objectives. I simply insist that they must have a plan of action that can actually advance those objectives, not merely wish and hope that somehow, by itself, the Syriza experience will become the launching pad for the development of a proletarian dictatorship. Without an *active* intervention by *conscious* revolutionaries—consistently educating both themselves and the rest of Syriza’s mass base about what is needed, even about how what is needed requires them to *at least prepare* to work *in opposition* to the Tsipras leadership which is intent on its strategy of forging a deal with European capital—the development of a Syriza government which turns out to be “a point of departure for achieving the proletarian dictatorship” in Greece is highly unlikely. This is true because any advance toward that goal would then depend on the unilateral evolution of the Tsipras leadership itself in a revolutionary direction. This is not excluded, of course. Stranger things have happened. But it does not seem prudent for us to bank on it.

Please don’t misunderstand the point of this commentary. I would be the last one to say that just because the Communist International in 1922 set out a strategic orientation for Bolsheviks to follow in relation to the workers’ and farmers’ government we, today, in the year 2015 must march in lock step with that orientation. The argument for what perspective to follow in Greece in 2015 still has to be made in its own terms, quite independently of such purely historical or theoretical considerations. There is much that is new and unique about Greece in 2015, political and social realities which could never have been anticipated by the Comintern in 1922.

So no, I am not advocating a slavish adherence to the Comintern line. The two points of this commentary are:

- a) If Lee Sustar *is* going to cite a theoretical precedent in favor of a particular orientation toward Syriza, he has an obligation to get the theory right. And
- b) in addition to all the differences just referred to, between today and 1922, there are (judging *the actual reality of Greece in 2015*, not just the theoretical conceptions of the Communist International in 1922) striking features that point to historical parallels, to the continued relevance of the strategic thinking that was advocated by the Comintern in its assessment of this question.

If we fail to pay rigorous attention to the relevant history/theory and develop our strategy accordingly (different from following any theory slavishly), if we simply allow nature to take its course instead, imperialism has shown repeatedly that it can channel nature—through economic, political, and (if all else fails) military means—thereby returning Greece to the task of “peacefully” churning out more profits for imperialist banks and corporations, with no concern for how many lives are lost or ruined in the process. So we need more than simply a hope that the present moment in Greece is a gateway to something better. Revolutionaries need to focus on developing the strategy we need now, while there is still time for them to implement that strategy and have some useful effect.

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