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Thinking Out Loud about Greece

by Steve Bloom

[Note: On Friday, February 6, a forum sponsored by a range of organizations was held in NYC to discuss the victory of Syriza in the recent Greek elections. Afterwards I had a brief conversation with someone I have discussed revolutionary ideas with from time to time in recent years. The next morning, after having had a chance to consider things, I sat down and wrote him an email to develop that discussion a bit more. Here is the text of that email, slightly edited. If you want to view the video of the forum which prompted these thoughts, click here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucd6s7FVd6Q&feature=youtu.be> (part 1) and <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/58517308> (part 2).]

Hi _____,

Here is how I would now formulate my frustration with last night's event, pending comment from you and, perhaps, discussion with others:

1) The primary conversation was about how Syriza will maneuver, now that it has governmental power, in the face of European capital—German capital in particular. There are two camps in that debate:

* Some assess what has already happened, along with future possibilities, in the usual bourgeois-parliamentary or bourgeois-diplomatic terms. This is a completely unrealistic assessment, since posed in this way Syriza's options are most constrained and its negotiating power the weakest.

* Others pose the necessity of promoting mass mobilization and an even more radical programmatic stance (nationalizing the banks, for example, or putting a break from the Euro on the table in discussions with the EU) as a way of strengthening Syriza's bargaining position and ability to maneuver—but still in a bourgeois-parliamentary or bourgeois-diplomatic context. This is better, but I would say that it stops half-way in terms of what is actually needed.

2) The key difficulty is to recognize that there is no longer-term solution within a bourgeois-parliamentary or bourgeois-diplomatic framework. Within that framework, if a more militant strategy is followed, a space might be carved out for a temporary reprieve from the austerity that has been imposed on Greece. But in the longer term the economic/diplomatic/political forces at work on the side of the imperial ruling classes will reassert themselves, or at least try to, insist on regaining control even if they have to resort to their military wing—or active support to Golden Dawn (which amounts to the

same thing)—in order to do so. So a confrontation is shaping up, probably a deadly confrontation, and the most important thing that the bourgeois-parliamentary or bourgeois-diplomatic maneuvering can help us to do right now is prepare, both a leadership cadre and the mass movement, for that confrontation. All of the analogies people are making with Spain in the 1930s are quite apt (and quite chilling) from this point of view. Those making the analogy then have to explain how we avoid the same outcome as in Spain.

3a) Who, in Greece, is posing this understanding, along with the task of preparation today for the confrontation which is coming tomorrow—in contrast to simply attempting to strengthen Syriza's hand in an immediate clash on the level of bourgeois diplomacy and resistance to economic pressure from the EU? I have not found anyone so far. It seems excluded that the present leadership of Syriza can play the necessary role, and it seems unlikely that a majority of that formation can be won to this task either, though such a development is not excluded a priori. So where can I find the conscious thought that is needed—about how an alternative leadership will emerge? How is that leadership going to organize and define itself? If it starts as an opposition in Syriza, what are the limits of this form? What preparations have to be made right now for the future likelihood that Syriza cannot be the political force which will move the struggle forward?

3b) There are groups and individuals who see and analyze the present reality in a transitional sense, talk about the need to move toward a "socialist rupture." But the articles along those lines that I have read seem to conceive of the process as almost automatic, a radicalization in which the Greek masses draw the conclusion that they need to break with bourgeois-parliamentary and bourgeois-diplomatic maneuvering **simply** from their own lived experience, then figure out spontaneously what steps to take in order to launch their "socialist rupture." This is, once again, only half of the necessary understanding. Yes, the Greek masses do have to go through a lived experience in order to draw the right conclusions. But neither those conclusions, nor a programmatic appreciation of the alternative, flow automatically, simply because of a lived experience. Disappointment, demobilization, demoralization, are just as likely (probably far more likely) as a result of the experiences that await—if there is not a revolutionary cadre, embedded in the mass movement, formulating demands and slogans based on the needed transformation of consciousness, engaged in a process of propaganda and agitation that can help consciousness to emerge in anticipation of the coming decisive confrontation. This, of course, is the role the Bolsheviks played in Russia between April and October 1917. Had there been no Bolshevik party raising slogans and engaging in propaganda, there would have been no Russian revolution—even though the lived experience of the workers and soldiers with the bourgeois-parliamentary maneuvering and bourgeois-diplomatic maneuvering of the Provisional Government would have raised all the same questions. It simply wouldn't have provided the answers.

So I have not seen anyone in the left of Syriza who seems to adequately comprehend the difficulty in these terms. I realize that they may exist, and I simply haven't run across them. But until I do I will say that I haven't seen anyone. I also didn't hear anyone at the forum last night. I kind of expected the Antarsya representative to at least pose the

question in the right terms, even though I don't agree with Antarsya's strategy of simply building an opposition on the outside. But no, his presentation was focused on the micro questions of what's wrong with Syriza's programmatic and diplomatic approach. So I came away disgruntled, and had not quite thought through why I was so disgruntled when I spoke to you. Hopefully it is clearer now, both to you and to me.

Final thought: Maybe I shouldn't be so concerned. If we extend our analogy to Russia in 1917, perhaps we are simply in the period of February-March, where I might have looked at the debates and discussions among the Russian left and drawn a conclusion similar to the one I draw right now about Greece: No one conceives of or is preparing for the decisive confrontation of class forces which is looming. It took Lenin, coming back in April and presenting his "April Theses" to the Bolshevik Party Congress before that process began to sort itself out. So yes, one reasonable approach would be to simply note the difficulty and then be patient, wait for the Greek Lenin to emerge. We probably do have more time for things to develop along the right strategic line in Greece, because there is no world war at the moment, not even the imminent threat of socialist revolution as there was in Russia and in Spain--which in turn **impels** the old ruling classes to engage in show-down tactics sooner, rather than later. I say this as a way of tempering or moderating my thinking. But it does not change my thinking, or my concern that I have not yet met the Greek Lenin (though I have met a number of individuals, and not only Greeks, whose posturing and repetition of formulaic slogans suggests that they are thinking of themselves in those terms).

Perhaps you or others can offer me links to statements or comments that you have seen that I haven't, statements or comments which suggest there are some in the Syriza left who are thinking along the necessary strategic lines. If so, or even if you just want to offer me your own thoughts, I look forward to hearing from you.

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