

Analysis: Panos Petrou

The battle for SYRIZA goes on

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Greece's Coalition of the Radical Left, known as SYRIZA, held its first congress on July 10-14. SYRIZA shocked Greece and all of Europe in the spring of last year, when it nearly won two national elections--it fell just short of the center-right New Democracy party and pushed the main center-left party PASOK into a distant third place. SYRIZA's appeal was its uncompromising opposition to austerity policies encapsulated in the so-called Memorandums negotiated with the "troika" of the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund. The Memorandums bailed out Greece's financial system, but on the condition of devastating cutbacks, tax increases and layoffs.

Greece has experienced new struggles against austerity in recent months, particularly surrounding the New Democracy-led coalition government's attempt to close down the state TV and radio broadcaster ERT. This revival of resistance was the setting for the debates about the future of SYRIZA that led up to the first Congress.

Last year, from November 30 to December 2, SYRIZA held a delegated conference intended to prepare for the first Congress this year. Voting at the conference made it clear that SYRIZA has two main components: a moderate majority camp, with about three-quarters of the delegates, headed by leaders of Synaspismos, the main group involved in the formation of SYRIZA; and the Left Platform, with about a quarter of the delegates, mainly composed of a left-wing current within Synaspismos and a coalition of three revolutionary groups.

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THE FIRST congress of SYRIZA, held from July 10 to July 14, came at a very critical point.

In June, the coalition government's closure of the public TV and radio station ERT provoked an occupation by workers, which in turn produced a huge wave of solidarity and revitalized the resistance movement against austerity.

This struggle caused a serious crisis for the government. The Democratic Left--known as DIMAR, a center-left party that formed in 2010 as a right-wing split from left reformist party Synaspismos, the largest group in SYRIZA--withdrew from the coalition government, leaving behind the conservative New Democracy (ND) and the main center-left party PASOK, with, between them, a bare majority of 153 members of parliament out of 300.

What's more, the government has pushed through further massive layoffs in the public sector, provoking a new round of struggles this spring--another one-day general strike, several sectoral strikes and mass demonstrations by different groups of workers--that may reach a new climax, if not during the summer, than certainly in the fall.

The Political Issues at Stake

Against this background, SYRIZA faces this question: How can the radical left claim governmental power without betraying its principles? The question can be answered concretely by looking at SYRIZA's alliances, its program, its vision for how it will win government power and what the call for a "left-wing government" would mean in terms of its tasks and duties.

In the months leading to the July congress, the SYRIZA leadership, representing the majority current, gave many indications that it is moving further toward a moderate approach on these issues.

For example, many leading SYRIZA members now talk about how, in the face of a social disaster, we must "save the nation first"--by which they mean that radical left-wing policies and a socialist perspective must be put aside to the future in order to deal immediately with the crisis.

Following this goal could put everything SYRIZA has stood for on the table. In social terms, it could mean a compromise with sections of the local or European ruling classes toward a project of restructuring the Greek economy (advocates claim such a project would be guided by the aims of "social justice," but that is a utopian impossibility in a time of capitalist crisis).

In political terms, the proposals of the majority could lead to an alliance with center-left forces like DIMAR or offshoots from PASOK. One leading SYRIZA member has gone even further, discussing the possibility of a "national salvation government" that excludes only the neo-Nazis and the "far-right pro-Samaras faction" of New Democracy!

The Left Platform tried to counter the proposals and positions of the majority during the Congress. The Left Platform is mainly made up of the Left Current, a tendency representing a left minority within Synaspismos; the Red Network, a front that brings together three revolutionary organizations--the Internationalist Workers Left (DEA), Kokkino (which means "Red") and the Anti-capitalist Political Group (APO); plus unaffiliated activists within SYRIZA.

The Left Platform articulated its different political direction in the form of amendments put forward as an alternative to the main political documents presented to the Congress by the majority.

The first amendment was to the draft declaration of principles of the party--the Left Platform proposed the need for a "second wave of radicalization" for SYRIZA, both in terms of its program and its involvement in the resistance movement.

On the document outlining the party's political positions, we proposed four amendments on the following subjects:

-- SYRIZA should repudiate the entirety of Greece's debt, support the cancellation of all loan agreements with the troika, and be prepared to use ending all payments if necessary to achieve debt cancellation.

-- SYRIZA should support nationalization under workers-popular control of the whole banking system and all strategic sectors of the economy, as a necessary means to meet workers needs and confront the attacks on the working class by the capitalists.

-- SYRIZA should call for a left-wing government that must be ready and prepared for a rupture with the eurozone and the European Union. There must be a clear and public commitment to reverse austerity "by any means necessary," including an exit from the eurozone to counter the blackmail of the EU.

-- SYRIZA should stand for a united front of left-wing parties, including the Communist Party and ANTARSYA, but refuse to cooperate with any political forces or leading politicians who carried out or accepted austerity policies, including DIMAR. We must aim for a left-wing government and are not open to alliances with center-left parties, "democratic" center-right formations or right-wing parties that are opposed to the Memorandums.

The Drive to Marginalize Dissent

Unfortunately, instead of a serious discussion of these issues, the Congress was organized around internal, organizational aspects.

The leadership of SYRIZA from the majority put forward the slogan of unification, with rhetoric about putting the party in the hands of its members rather than the component organizations, which was the

basis of SYRIZA's organization previously, as a coalition of radical parties. This false call for "unification" came with three concrete proposals.

- All organizations that are component parts of SYRIZA must dissolve immediately.
- Serious restrictions on the rights of internal factions and tendencies, mostly to constrain different "lists" of candidates for internal elections, which is how proportional representation for the groups within SYRIZA on leading bodies has been ensured.
- Election of the chair of the party by the Congress, and not by the Central Committee.

In support of these proposals, leading members of the majority camp of SYRIZA claimed that the component groups operated as organized parties within the party, and that they were the biggest obstacles to unity. The left-wing minority, which defended the right of component groups to exist within SYRIZA, was accused of being "conservatives" who don't want to put SYRIZA in the hands of its members.

But there are no procedures and policies governing SYRIZA's functioning that are "obstacles" to democracy. Previously, the groups that formed the SYRIZA coalition had right of a veto--this has been ended. So are the quotas for representation on leading bodies. The "one member, one vote" principle has been guaranteed within SYRIZA, and so has decision-making by majority rule.

Despite the demagoguery of members of the majority, SYRIZA's composition as a coalition of component organizations has never been a concern for people supporting or getting involved in SYRIZA, and it has never caused any problems with SYRIZA's functioning. So what was really at stake with these organizational questions?

In essence, the goal of the SYRIZA leadership was to quiet dissent in a bureaucratic way. Behind the slogans for unity and the demagoguery about putting SYRIZA in the hands of its members was an effort to marginalize any organized internal opposition.

What is the political motivation underlying this drive? Ever since the elections last year, the component groups inside SYRIZA have become an obsession for the right-wing New Democracy and the mass media, who demand constantly that Alexis Tsipras impose discipline within his own party. As Stathis Kouvelakis, a prominent left-winger and member of the SYRIZA Central Committee, wrote recently, in the mainstream discourse, the "component groups" have become a synonym for the existence of organized radical, left-wing views inside SYRIZA.

The demand that the "components" must be "dealt with" is, in reality, the ruling class demanding of the leadership of SYRIZA that it transform the party into a reliable and responsible force that can be entrusted with the reins of government. The same thing applies to the effort to restrict electoral rights for internal party tendencies and to elect the chair from the Congress, rather than the Central Committee.

The quite obvious goal is to marginalize the Left Platform and to make Alexis Tsipras appear to be in complete control of the party.

Unfortunately, the public discussion during the period before the Congress, and then the discussion at the Congress itself, focused on these organizational questions, obscuring the real political issues at stake.

The Results on the Political Document

In the votes on the party's declaration of principles and the political document, all of the amendments put forward by the Left Platform were rejected. They won from 30 percent to over 40 percent of the vote. The amendments on repudiating the entire debt and on being prepared to leave the eurozone proved to be the most popular--they were supported by over 40 percent of delegates, a higher percentage than the organized forces of the Left Platform.

But while the Left Platform's amendments were defeated, this should not be interpreted as the SYRIZA Congress deciding to "moderate" the party's program, as both the mainstream media and some other left-wing forces have claimed, each for different reasons.

The political document presented and supported by the SYRIZA majority did not explicitly put forward more moderate positions compared to the previous program. The document was basically the same one that passed at last year's preparatory conference.

Both documents have vague and vacillating language that allows for both left-wing and right-wing interpretations. It calls, for example, for renegotiating the loan agreements with the troika with the goal of cancelling the bulk of the debt--rather than outright repudiation of the debt. It says that we don't wish to exit the Eurozone, but must be ready for any possible scenario. It calls for "public control" of the banking system, rather than an explicit declaration in favor of workers-popular control.

What the Left Platform fought for was the radicalization of the current program--to make a more explicit commitment that would not allow for moderate interpretations. In this sense, the vote at the Congress on political issues was not a turn to the right, but a refusal to abandon the status quo for a more radical and more explicit declaration.

The other factor involved in the vote on the amendments was the wider attempt by the majority to push its proposals through in the name of "unity," and to show support for the SYRIZA leadership against its critics among the left-wing groups within SYRIZA. Disappointingly, a section of the delegates was determined to vote on this basis against anything proposed by the Left Platform. But it is also true that the content of the amendments probably has a wider support inside SYRIZA than was reflected by the voting in such a polarized atmosphere.

The Results on Organizational Questions

Dissolution of organizations: The proposal was for component groups within SYRIZA to dissolve in two to three months' time. Some organizations chose to dissolve immediately or at least to no longer have a distinct public face. Among the SYRIZA groups that rejected the ultimatum was DEA; the Movement for the United in Action Left, a group of unionists that split from the Communist Party in the early 2000s; and and Active Citizens, a group led by Manolis Glezos, a leader of the anti-Nazi Resistance during the Second World War.

Glezos gave a powerful speech at the Congress that not only challenged the right of the SYRIZA majority to decide what other organizations should do, but also warning about the danger of a party centered around a single leader.

During the voting on this question, there was a very heated debate, with most of the attacks centered on DEA for refusing to dissolve. We stood our ground against this measure, and we had some crucial allies, both from the Left Current within Synaspismos, and from ANASA, a tendency within SYRIZA that represents the left wing of the majority camp, comprised of libertarian communists; the left Eurocommunist group AKOA, which decided to dissolve; and unaffiliated members of SYRIZA. These comrades defended DEA and its contribution to both SYRIZA and the social movements, as well as other component groups and the importance of the various ideological currents that they represent.

DEA's explicit refusal to dissolve and the reaction of other comrades who supported it forced the leadership of SYRIZA to resort to a compromise: The proposal was amended to say that the future of groups within SYRIZA and how they operate will be decided only after "mutual consultations" that will take "some reasonable time."

Electoral rights for tendencies: Tsipras himself tried to eliminate the use of different electoral lists for elections to leading bodies of SYRIZA. When this met with fierce reaction from the Left Platform, he proposed that elections should be held based on entirely separate ballot lists. The effect is to present

the Left Platform or any other opposition as outsiders who are against the party as a whole, since the majority doesn't present itself as a tendency or alliance of tendencies, but as the unified ballot.

Until now, SYRIZA elections have had a single ballot, with various lists contained in it. This gave delegates the choice to vote for a whole list, but also to choose, in a limited way, candidates from both lists.

The Congress adopted the Tsipris proposal, but in the end, the idea backfired on the leadership. Many delegates who aren't part of the Left Platform refused to be identified with the "unified" majority ballot. "presidential majority": As a result, there were six different ballots for delegates to choose from.

Four of the ballots won around 1 percent of the vote or less, and received one or two seats on the Central Committee in three of the four cases. The "Unaffiliated Members of SYRIZA" list got 1.03 percent of the vote and received 2 seats on the Central Committee; the "Communist Current" got 0.74 percent of the vote for 2 CC seats; the "Intervention of Members" got 0.27 percent for 1 CC member; and the "Intervention for Unity" got 0.21 percent and no CC members.

Because so many delegates were shocked by the arrogant behavior of the majority camp during the Congress, the Left Platform increased its representation on the Central Committee, winning 30.15 percent of the vote for its ballot list--up from 25 percent in December. It has 60 members on the Central Committee.

With the influence of the Left Platform plus the appearance of small "independent" ballot lists, the so-called "unified" ballot won 67.6 percent of the vote in elections for the Central Committee, down by 7 percent from the conference last December.

Election for SYRIZA chair: Many members and forces within SYRIZA, including inside the majority camp, agreed with the criticism that it is against the traditions of the left wing to have a "leader." The Left Platform and others argued that if there has to be a single leading figure in the position of party chair, that person should be elected--and, more importantly, controlled in between congresses--by the Central Committee.

In the end, Tsipras and the SYRIZA majority won approval of its proposal for Congress delegates to elect the party chair. In order to win this argument, however, the leadership had present the issue as an extraordinary circumstance for the coming year--that right now, SYRIZA needs a strong leading figure in order to appear as a united party and to contest upcoming elections. It was agreed that each Congress will decide the way to elect a party chair.

In the end, the victory on how to elect a chair was Pyrrhic. Though he faced no serious opponent--there were two other purely symbolic candidacies--Tsipras won only 72 percent of the vote. The rest of the ballots for chair were mainly blank votes, expressing disapproval of either Tsipras or the electoral process.

The Balance Sheet from the Congress

In terms of SYRIZA's program and political stances, the majority camp won a victory. The leadership succeeded in defeating more explicit left-wing statements on the issues, and maintained the vague program. As state above, because of the vagueness, the real issue is how SYRIZA's program is interpreted, particularly by the "TV stars" of the party who are interviewed in the media and usually chose to portray the party program in a more moderate and "realistic" direction.

But on the central issue of contention at the Congress--the attempt to marginalize and even expel dissenting voices, it is clear that the leadership has failed, at least for now.

The mainstream media were all set to declare that the Congress of SYRIZA had voted in favor of moderation--that Tsipris had won and the left wing was tamed. But the outcome of the voting,

especially on organizational questions, forced them to admit that the leadership faces a strengthened opposition.

Drawing up a balance sheet is complicated, therefore. On the one hand, we saw some serious efforts toward transforming SYRIZA into another type of party, with less radical and political positions and less tolerance for debate and discussion. The aggressive attitude of the leadership toward the Left Platform; the emergence of a bloc of delegates prepared to support the leadership no matter what; and the rhetoric about facing an "emergency situation" which requires setting aside left-wing principles are worrying signs.

On the other hand, we also witnessed what can only be described as a rebellion against the prospect of such a transformation. The defeats and retreats of the majority camp on a number of issues; the significant increase of the percentage of votes for the Left Platform, particularly in the context of the systematic effort to marginalize it; the fact that the majority camp isn't as homogenous as it once appeared--all of this proves that the battle over the direction of SYRIZA isn't over.

Where next?

With angry protests exploding on the streets of Brazil over the past several months, we can see clearly the limits of the strategy of the Workers Party (PT), with its roots in the country's working class and left-wing movements. Yet the PT has sought to overcome ruling class resistance to its rule by appeasing the capitalists with broad alliances and moderate policies.

SYRIZA needs to take the alternate path. The radical left in Greece should aim to come to governmental power against the will of the ruling class--as the representative of a massive social and political movement, through its commitment to a left-wing program that will inspire the working class.

This is what the struggle inside SYRIZA is about, and the successes of the Left Platform at the July Congress send a powerful signal:

-- To the SYRIZA leadership, that it will face a strong internal opposition in any attempt to "turn right."

-- To the ruling class, that SYRIZA will not be easy to tame.

-- And to other parts of the left, especially the Communist Party and ANTARSYA, that there is a strong left-wing opposition within SYRIZA that is waging a struggle they should support.

The battle over the direction of SYRIZA goes on--and as always since its formation, the development of working-class struggles will be the most crucial ally for its left wing.

<http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/30/the-battle-for-syriza-goes-on>