THE INTERNATIONALIST STRATEGY FOR RESOLVING THE SITUATION IN GREECE by Phil Sharpe

June 30th was the date for resolving the negotiations between the European financial institutions and the IMF with the Greek government led by the Syriza organisation. No agreement was reached, and instead financial instability in Greece has intensified which has led to the government calling a referendum (to be held on July 5th) in order to establish popular approval for its stance of opposition to European bail out proposals that would impose severe austerity and public expenditure cuts. However the alternative to European imposed austerity seems to be a return to Greece’s worthless national currency and the flight of capital that would result in increased inflation and unemployment. In this context there would seem to be no serious alternative to pragmatic acceptance of the proposals of the European Central Bank for the imposition of austerity which would imply the possibility for financial and social stability. Syriza seem to have no room for manoeuvre, and a No vote in the referendum would not resolve anything accept the fact that the government still has popular support for its intransigent position. Given the lack of options available to Syriza, Weekly Worker has argued that: “Syriza should have avoided the temptation of office, and that was a serious option whatever the left might dogmatically insist. It could have refused the 50 seat top up, working to constitute itself as an extreme party of opposition and strengthen its position within society as a whole. Most of all, the Greek left needs to work with others across Europe to bring nearer the day when we can challenge for power across the whole continent.”(1)

This approach is an example of a purist standpoint that upholds the interests of the party as being primary when compared to the aspirations of the working class and the other social layers of Greek society. What is being suggested is that the party should consider how to maintain its principles and therefore neglect the attitudes of the working class. The point is that the Greek people voted for the formation of a Syriza government. It would have been a betrayal of these voters if Syriza had suddenly suggested that it could not form an administration because of the unfavourable circumstances. Indeed, this reticence to become a government would have been conceived as cowardice and the result would have been the dramatic loss of support for Syriza. It would have been argued that it had placed the narrow interests of party above the aspirations of the Greek people. The result would have been a discrediting of Syriza and the general rejection of left-wing ideas for many decades. Thankfully the advice of Weekly Worker was not accepted and instead Syriza formed a government with a serious minimum programme of opposition to austerity, and negotiations with the European financial institutions on that basis. However the EU and the financial organisations are not interested in compromise because they do not want to establish a precedent for other countries that may be interested in adopting an anti-austerity policy. They also want to make the economic and political situation untenable for Syriza, and therefore an intransigent stance creates the conditions for its downfall.

Indeed, if the present uncertainty and economic chaos promotes support for a yes vote in the referendum the Syriza government would have no option than to call a new election. It would be completely untenable for the present administration to implement the austerity programme demanded by the European financial institutions. However Weekly Worker also argue that nothing is to be gained from a No Vote: “If the people vote overwhelmingly on July 5th against austerity and the dictat of the institutions, then that would be positive, but only in a very limited sense. They will have rejected the status quo – true. But what is the alternative? The truth is, there can be no solutions within the confines of tiny Greece – or indeed any other single country.”(2) This conclusion is negative. Firstly, a popular vote against austerity would provide the government with additional democratic credentials with which to begin a struggle for opposing the dictates of the financial institutions. In contrast, a yes vote would deny this democratic legitimacy and imply that Syriza was acting against the national will. Secondly, the options are limited but democratic support can begin the process of widening the struggle against austerity to other countries. The inspiring example of the No vote could be utilised in order to challenge defeatism and passivity in other countries and instead promote an international struggle against austerity. Thirdly, the No vote could promote new negotiations that have greater flexibility and the prospect of concessions. (This situation is occurring) Fourthly, a No vote is the only political basis to justify the continuation of the Syriza government. The alternative of a Syriza government accepting the strict conditions of the EU is unprincipled and in this situation a new election should be called. In other words, only with a No vote could the continuation of a Syriza government be advisable.

Thus we refuse to accept the Weekly Worker standpoint that the situation is effectively hopeless. The situation seems to have little room for manoeuvre but there are always options. This should mean that the resignation of the present Greek government should be a last resort after all other possibilities have been exhausted. Indeed, this resignation should only take place after the expression of a formal majority for a Yes vote. In these circumstances the Greek people should decide how to tackle the situation in terms of the mandate of the electoral will. If Syriza lost any forthcoming election people would then understand why it had become a party of opposition and that the situation had not been favourable for the implementation of anti-austerity. The aim would then become to develop a more formidable movement of opposition to austerity, and that this struggle in order to become truly effective would have to become international.

However it is necessary to recognise that Syriza is a left-reformist formation. Hence its primary project is the administration of a caring capitalism and is not interested in the realisation of socialism. This is why its perspective is based on negotiations with the institutions of the EU, and is indifferent to the aim of developing an international struggle against austerity. Its aims are limited by Greek nationalism and so the creation of a revolutionary party in Greece is vitally necessary. This party would promote the formation of a mass movement that would have as its ultimate aim the international struggle for socialism. This strategy would recognise that the opposition to austerity cannot be limited to the role of nations, and negotiations with the important financial institutions, and instead policy is based on the generation of class struggle. However, the revolutionary party would hope to gain support within Syriza for this perspective. Furthermore, the socialist party would support all measures introduced by Syriza that advanced the interests of the working class. Hence the differences between the revolutionary party and Syriza would concern strategy and programme and would not be sectarian and dogmatic. At present this revolutionary party does not exist and so it is necessary to encourage its formation from the present militant and disaffected working class. In order to build this party it will be necessary to challenge the ideological limitations of Greek nationalism. This party will also have a flexible policy of calling for a critical vote for Syriza, but this will not represent illusions in this party. The revolutionary organisation will not assume that Syriza can introduce a workers government or implement socialist measures. Instead only a mass movement from below can introduce socialist type policies and therefore we should reject any conception of ‘socialism from above’. However, we should also support the anti-austerity aims of Syriza and suggest how these aims can be promoted as effectively as possible.

In this context the pessimism of Weekly Worker should be rejected as defeatist. There is always possibilities for advance despite very unfavourable circumstances. We should not be under any illusions about difficulties but we also have to suggest how seemingly complex problems can be tackled in the most principled manner. Hence, we should reject the view that: “With absolute predictability, Syriza’s options have dwindled to nothing.”(3) This comment is only true to the extent that it has apparent empirical validity given the difficult conditions and the immense power of the financial institutions. But what is omitted in this comment is any sense of what could be possible if the working class of Greece and the EU mobilised against austerity. Instead of accepting the present dire limitations of ‘what is’ we have to aim to promote ‘what could be’. Nevertheless we have to accept that this revolutionary option is unlikely to happen in the near future, but other possibilities are still available. The dogmatic viewpoint of Weekly Worker rules out any eventuality other than the reinforcement of the status quo. We have to reject this pessimistic reasoning.

THE GREEK PEOPLE VOTE NO IN THE REFERENDUM

Over 60% of the Greek people have voted against the imposition of the austerity bail out proposals of the European Central Bank and the EU. This development has created a political crisis for the EU because it has to acknowledge that its economic proposals lack majority support within Greece. The result is that the EU is now under political pressure to outline economic proposals that would be acceptable to Syriza and the Greek population. In other words the referendum vote indicates that political will can still defy the so-called laws of economic orthodoxy and represent the basis to develop an alternative to deflation and austerity. However in order to establish international support for its position, Syriza should send representatives to the various countries of the EU in order to promote the formation of an broader campaign against austerity and for the expansion of the European economy. This campaign should be the prelude to the calling of an international general strike against austerity. It is necessary to reject any notions of socialism within one country. Cuba was only able to exist because of subsidies from the USSR, and its recent isolation has meant it has had to renew diplomatic links with the USA. Hence Cuba was a siege economy because of international support. Greece has been reduced to a siege economy because of its isolation within the EU. The leaders of the EU hope that continued economic pressure will bring about economic collapse. They hope that Syriza will be forced to accept the bail-out proposals of the European Central Bank. This possibility could still happen unless the political balance of class forces changes in favour of the Greek people. Hence it is crucial that Syriza adopt an internationalist strategy that can promote a struggle against austerity that goes beyond the boundaries of Greece.

The present situation is also a test of nerve for Syriza. On the one hand it is inconceivable that the EU can allow the Greek economy to collapse because of the instability it could cause. If Greece went into severe depression, the result could be the revival of the world recession. Thus the EU will be under the pressure of the USA to reach a compromise with Syriza. However, the EU also reckons that the present situation will become intolerable and so anticipates the Greek government will be forced to accept the demands of the European Central Bank. Thus, the pressures are still intensifying on Syriza in order to make a deal. This is why the intransigent Greek finance minister resigned. Consequently, the only alternative to a humiliating defeat is to adopt an internationalist strategy that broadens the struggle against austerity. Force the EU to accept the proposals of Syriza via the development of international class struggle! This perspective is not fantasy. Already the leaders of the EU have been shaken by the referendum decision of the Greek people. It would not be inconceivable that these leaders could be forced to resign by the development of a genuine international mass movement against austerity. Unfortunately the nationalism of Syriza is an important ideological influence that undermines the adoption of this strategy. This regressive standpoint needs to be rejected and instead the democratic mandate of Syriza needs to be reinforced with a recognition of the understanding that the only alternative to an uncertain future is to promote the importance of international opposition to austerity. Sceptics will argue that generally the various peoples of the EU are unsympathetic to the plight of Greece. This point may be true. Germans consider that they have been very generous to an ungrateful Greece. But these unsympathetic attitudes can be challenged by a campaign that appeals to a sense of working class solidarity. The stance of Greece could become the beginning of a wider struggle against austerity. Time is precious. The only alternative to this strategy is intensifying economic chaos and the prospect of ultimate acceptance of the proposals of the financial institutions. The objective economic conditions of isolation generate this prospect of capitulation, but this isolation can be undermined by the promotion of a strategy of international struggle against austerity.

THE PROPOSALS OF THE GREEK GOVERNMENT

Under pressure from the EU, Syriza has outlined its proposals for obtaining more bail out money from the EU. These plans have been influenced by the French government in order to realise a compromise that will satisfy all the various parties. The plans amount to an acceptance of limited austerity involving VAT increases and limited privatisation. These measures amount to concessions made by Syriza in order to obtain an agreement. Given the conditions of isolation and growing economic chaos in Greece it was very unlikely that an intransigent position could have been maintained. Instead the balance of class forces, which favoured the financial institutions, meant that the only option was for a retreat that would accept many of the aims of the EU. This retreat could be portrayed as a betrayal by Syriza. This is the position of some of the Greek Communists. However it would be a dogmatic position to adopt which suggested Syriza had betrayed the Greek people. The point is that the economic power is with the EU and the financial institutions. Without the development of international struggle against austerity the Greek government had little room for manoeuvre. The period of bluff had been carried out in protracted terms and the time has arrived when decisive decisions had to be made. This meant the only principled option for the Greek government was to compose a compromise programme that would try and uphold the commitment to public services and opposition to austerity. It was understood by Syriza that this would not be an ideal plan but it would represent the most principled option in the given circumstances. In other words if the German government rejected this plan they will be considered to be dogmatic and unwilling to accept a compromise. Thus the onus is on Germany to agree the latest plan for an economic settlement. However, it is inconceivable that Germany will reject this compromise because the failure to reach agreement will mean that Greece could leave the Eurozone. This option is not wanted by any member of the EU. Instead it is likely that the situation can be temporarily resolved by a compromise. If this was to occur the result will represent a tremendous victory for the Greek people.

This prospect of compromise will indicate that it is possible to promote struggle against austerity despite the pressure of the EU and international financial institutions. What may occur does not represent victory in the sense that an austerity policy has still been agreed. But the proposals of the EU will not be as harsh as was originally envisaged. The change to the situation is because of the leadership and initiative of Syriza. They have resisted all of the attempts to capitulate and accept the austerity aims of the EU. Instead their intransigence has resulted in a compromise plan. If Germany accept this new plan the aim should then be to develop an international wide movement against austerity. This promotion of a popular struggle would undermine attempts to impose new forms of austerity onto Greece in the near future. Instead the partial victories of the present could become the basis to create a political struggle to transform the EU into becoming an organisation that expresses the interests and aspirations of working people in a principled manner. However, at present, agreement is still being undermined by the attitude of the German government. Therefore nothing can be taken for granted. It is still possible for Germany to persuade the EU to reject the compromise plan because of the problem of financial irresponsibility. (There is significant support for this standpoint) Thus Europe is confronted with the choices of a momentous decision. The reluctance to accept the proposals of Syriza are because this would be considered to be an undermining of austerity. Consequently the doctrines of political economy conflict with the common sense of compromise. Will dogma outweigh expediency? Whatever the result the forces of Marxism must engage in a serious campaign to oppose the implementation of austerity within the EU. This development would represent the most effective manner in which solidarity could be expressed for Syriza.

Unfortunately Germany and the financial institutions have rejected the prospect of compromise. The final plan agreed by the EU and Greece represents the imposition of severe austerity: “European leaders warned Greece…..to implement draconian austerity measures within 72 hours or face effective expulsion from the single currency.”(4) The measures include increases in VAT, pension reforms and public expenditure cuts. There is the also the future prospect of the transfer of state assets worth more than 20% of GDP to the EU fund. The prospects for Syriza are bleak considering the unpopularity of these measures with its most left-wing supporters: “Mr Tsipras may not survive the week if Syriza left-wingers rebel and his coalition with Greek nationalist’s fractures while trying to pass the austerity measures that were rejected in the referendum.”(5) In other words the political coherence of Syriza threatens to be undermined if it attempts to impose the austerity measures of the EU. This situation would mean that it could only continue to have a semblance of political power if it enters into coalition with the more right wing parties. Such a development would disorient the supporters of Syriza and result in confusion and a rapid loss of support. Instead it would be more principled if Syriza resigned and called for new elections. These would indicate whether the Greek people still have confidence in Syriza and are prepared for this left-wing party to preside over austerity imposed by the EU. If Syriza lose elections it can still maintain that it has been as effective and principled as possible under adverse circumstances. Furthermore, there was a brief moment when a compromise deal might have been possible. Only the intransigence of Germany meant that full scale austerity is being proposed. In this situation the continuation of Syriza in government is effectively untenable. It is necessary to resign in order to accept the future mandate of the people.

The election of a new Syriza government would also pose contradictions, but it would become necessary to reconcile the continuation of a left-wing administration with the imposition of an EU enforced austerity. This situation of a condition of orderly retreat does not mean passive acceptance of the austerity imposed plan. Instead the aim should be to develop international support for a mass struggle against austerity. The problems with developing Greek national defiance of austerity should not be a justification for accepting the status quo. Instead the Greeks should express their dissatisfaction with the EU imposed settlement through the promotion of international struggle against austerity. Instead of demoralisation caused by the defeat of the attempt to defy the institutions of the EU and IMF, the Greek working class should utilise any re-election of a Syriza government in order to develop new methods of struggle that are superior to militant negotiations with the institutions of the IMF. However if Syriza is not re-elected because of being discredited by the defeat represented by the imposed austerity it should become the most militant voice of the promotion of international struggle against austerity.

In other words, as Lenin was aware, a process of orderly retreat is preferable to disorderly retreat in a situation of confusion and demoralisation. The latter would occur if the Syriza government tried to continue despite being split, and because of having to rely on oppositional bourgeois forces for survival. The aim of ‘power at all costs’ would surely disorient its supporters and transform Syriza into being the agency of austerity within Greek society. Left wing politics would become to be considered to be hypocritical and inconsistent, and so the result would be the growth of the forces of right-wing Greek nationalism. Instead after supervising the introduction of the EU austerity plan, Syriza should resign and carry out a process of orderly retreat. If re-elected, it should promote new tactics in order to re-generate international opposition to austerity. This process should involve developing international mass action rather than relying on negotiations with the EU. The period of negotiations is over, and it should be replaced by the perspective of militant struggle. This does not mean that the negotiations with the EU were futile. Tactical sophistication meant that the prospect of a compromise settlement was possible. The French government became supporters of this standpoint. Ultimately the intransigence of Germany defeated the aims of negotiations and instead severe austerity has been proposed. It is more principled for Syriza to accept defeat and orderly retreat rather than cling to power. The calling of new elections would enable Syriza to re-group. If re-elected it should proclaim not passivity but support for new internationalist tactics in order to oppose austerity.

COMMENT ON THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE MARXIST LEFT

Consistent with the pessimism of the coverage of Weekly Worker they refuse to consider the recent No vote in the Greek referendum as a victory for the working class: “Voting for the status quo was an unacceptable option. But was it the correct tactic in Greece to vote ‘No’ – the best way to advance working class interests? That is the fundamental question.”(6) Instead of considering the significance of a democratic vote against austerity it is argued by Eddie Ford that the only option is for the imposition of austerity and so the political character of the No vote represents a deception of the people: “Both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ equalled an attack on the working class. Either way it is austerity. Indeed, on July 5 the people were not asked about austerity per se – they were asked about what had been on the table after months of tortuous negotiations. That made the referendum a trap or political con trick, not the height of democracy. The no vote was in practice a vote of confidence in the Greek government; to believe anything else is to retreat into fantasy.”(7) This standpoint is very cynical. The point is that the Greek people were effectively asked whether they supported the anti-austerity position of the government. Negotiations did not compromise this standpoint because Syriza was trying to establish a situation in which its aims could be upheld despite the stance of the EU. Hence supporting the government in the referendum meant upholding its negotiating aims that were an attempt to defend the principles of anti-austerity. This might be a fragile aim under the circumstances of immense economic pressure of the EU, but it was still an aim that was supported by the Greek people in the referendum. Hence there was no deception in the referendum question because it was widely recognised that the aims of Syriza would be difficult to realise. Thus to suggest Syriza was engaging in the politics of deception actually represents an underestimation of the ability of the people to understanding the difficulties of the situation. The view of Eddie Ford is similar to that of Labour party spokespersons, who accuse Syriza of misleading the people. Instead the No vote was a genuine expression of confidence in the actions of Syriza at the negotiating table despite the economic difficulties in Greece.

Ford emphasises his view when he comments: “We in the CPGB did not advocate voting for ‘slightly less austerity’ in the person of Ed Miliband, so why would we do so when it comes to Alexis Tsipras – just because people have illusions in him? We are fighters for consistent democracy and working class independence, not haggling with EU and IMF bureaucrats.”(7) But the CPGB do advocate voting for ED Miliband given their critical voting for the Labour party. But they apparently cannot justify support for Syriza, a left reformist party, even when it attempts in a principled manner to try and uphold it anti-austerity policies in difficult circumstances. It is also dogmatic ultra-leftism to condemn negotiations with the EU and IMF in a situation which is not revolutionary and therefore makes this diplomatic action unavoidable given Greece’s membership of both institutions. It is not negotiations with economic and political institutions that make Syriza supposedly opportunist, rather it would be the effective repudiation of principles and aims in order to obtain an agreement. Instead Syriza has tried to defend its anti-austerity programme in difficult conditions and despite immense pressures to reject and undermine its policies. Without international revolution there is no alternative to difficult negotiations, but instead of acknowledging the pressures of the situation, Ford seems to take pleasure in outlining the apparent alternatives of Greece either accepting EU austerity or instead exiting the Euro and imposing a siege economy. The result of his dogmatic analysis is that the prospect of a compromise settlement was out of the question and instead defeat was an inevitable certainty: “Yes, Ok, on July 5th, the majority of the Greek people rallied behind Syriza, but Syriza’s entire strategy is premised on its negotiations that will almost certainly result in the continuation of austerity, albeit in a modified form. Hence our tactics should be designed to expose Syriza, not support it.”(9)

The dogmatism and pessimism of this analysis means that any conception of critical support for a government that aimed to oppose austerity is rejected. In order to bolster his argument Ford utilises the view that Syriza has taken no internal measures to undermine the social power of capitalism. This is true, but the point is that Syriza is not a revolutionary party that has failed to uphold its objectives of advancing the transformation of society. Instead it is a left reformist party with the immediate aim of ending the imposition of austerity by the EU and IMF. In relation to this objective it has been principled and has negotiated with the EU in terms of flexibility and firmness despite immense pressure and unfavourable circumstances. It has not ‘sold out’ in terms of its immediate aims and objectives and instead has attempted to uphold them despite the intransigence of the EU and IMF. Hence whilst we do not have illusions in Syriza to the extent that it is not a revolutionary party, we can provide critical support given that it has essentially upheld its principles. The test will come in the next two weeks, but if it adopts the standpoint of orderly retreat it will be possible to re-organise and mobilise for the struggles of tomorrow.

In his reply to the views of Eddie Ford, Arthur Bough outlines how Syriza is not a revolutionary party and its aim is not the socialist reconstruction of society. Instead we should supply critical support on the basis of the immediate situation and the aim of making progress in the class struggle: “Just because you cannot win the war immediately does not mean that you cannot win the odd skirmish here and there in order to advance your positions and, to the extent that social democrats wage such struggles, Marxists should give them critical support and not stand like sectarians carping from the sidelines.”(10) This point seems to be correct, but it actually underestimates the significance of what is occurring. In his discussion of the economic reasons why the EU is opposed to the aims of Syriza, Bough never mentions the political aspect such as the fact that governments like Germany do not want Syriza to establish the vitally important precedent of being the first government to undermine the austerity policy of the ruling class. Victory in this regard would represent an immense advance in the class struggle and generate significant progress in the attempt to realise an alternative to capitalism. Thus the imposition of austerity in Greece is politically important and means that the alternative of Keynesian expansionism is rejected because it is considered to be favourable to the interests of the working class. Instead of recognising this historical significance, the economic determinism of Bough suggests: “But does anyone truly believe that the policies of Keynesian fiscal stimulus, or even just opposition to austerity, are not compatible with the economic conditions that exist under capitalism?”(11) What is not recognised by this comment is that the adoption of anti-austerity and Keynesianism may be modest in economic terms but it would politically represent a significant transformation of the balance of the class forces. Indeed this point is recognised implicitly by Bough when he suggests that the struggle of Syriza has inspired left-wing forces throughout Europe.

However despite these criticisms, Bough is making a perceptive point that the situation has matured for Syriza to adopt a standpoint of extreme opposition, or orderly retreat. This standpoint would be preferable to the desperate clinging to power in a situation of the imposition of austerity. However, it is necessary to clarify why we prefer the standpoint of orderly retreat to that of extreme opposition. Bough defines extreme opposition in the following terms: “‘We did our bit, but we can go no further under current conditions.’ It will then be in a better position to be able to adopt the position of extreme opposition, in the hope that conditions will change.”(11) What is neglected by this perspective is the importance of elections which will be created by the abdication of political power by Syriza. In other words the orderly retreat could quickly re-create the conditions for the rapid re-gaining by Syriza of political power because of winning the new elections. The character of the democratic process will mean that Syriza is unable to become a stable party of extreme opposition. Instead it will have to act in accordance with the democratic mandate and become a party of government. In this context it will have to impose the austerity plans imposed by the EU. The only political basis for transcending this situation is if Syriza become a party that promotes international struggle against austerity.

The economic emphasis of Bough does not establish the significance of the reasons why the EU is determined not to allow Syriza to claim victory in relation to its attempt to establish an anti-austerity agenda. Hence the EU must impose a deflationary approach on Greece because the alternative would imply that Greece had successfully defied the will of the EU. The only successful arrangement for the EU is one which is imposed and which has to be reluctantly accepted by Syriza. Bough is correct to suggest that this polarisation could be avoided if the EU agreed to write off a large amount of Greek debt. But the EU acts ‘tough’ because its aim is not an amicable settlement and instead it aims to humiliate Syriza, which has to implement the anti-austerity plan. The purpose of EU policy is to discredit left-wing politics and to suggest that there is no alternative to policies that are in the interests of capitalism. The EU has succeeded in this intention to the extent that Syriza is in disarray and the country is discontented and confused. It is entirely possible that Syriza will lose the next election because of the approach of the EU.

However it would be wrong to conclude that the EU is the major opposition to the standpoint of anti-austerity. This is the position of Owen Jones who argues that the approach of the EU towards Greece indicates why it is necessary to rejuvenate a left-wing argument for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU: “The left’s pessimism about the possibility of implementing social reform at home without the help of the EU fused with a progressive vision of internationalism and unity, one that has emerged from the rubble of fascism and genocidal war. It is perhaps this feelgood halo that has been extinguished by a country the EU has driven into an economic collapse unseen since the American depression. It was German and French banks who recklessly lent to Greece that have benefitted from the bailouts, not the Greek economy. The destruction of Greek national sovereignty was achieved by economic strangulation. Ugly indeed.”(12)

What he does not recognise is firstly, the fact that it is capitalism, whether in global, form, EU form, or national form, that is the cause for the imposition of austerity policies and the strict bail-out programme imposed on Greece. The dominant politicians in the EU are not primarily acting in terms of the impulse for the humiliation of Greece by Germany but instead are motivated by their conception of what represents the interests of capitalism. This dynamic would still occur if Greece was not in the EU. In these circumstances the national debt of Greece may not be paid to the bankers, but national capitalists would demand low wages, public expenditure cuts and the introduction of a currency linked to the Euro in order to avoid inflation and enable a siege economy to function. Hence Greece could not be liberated if it was outside the EU, and instead would accumulate new economic difficulties. So-called national sovereignty is a myth in a world economy based on the dynamics of globalisation or the inter-connected development of the productive forces, and instead the so-called liberation of Greece from the EU would mean the imposition of autarky, or an economy that attempts to be self-sufficient, which in practice means fewer imports of important raw materials and consumer goods, and as a result the standard of living of the people drastically decreases. There will also be a rise in unemployment in the industries and service dependent on imports. Consequently the prospect of socialism in one country is an illusion. National economic development is not socialism and instead this situation will create new problems, and scarcity will promote the formation of a bureaucracy in order to administer the society. This regressive possibility means that the most progressive perspective still remains that of transforming the EU into a socialist United States of Europe. National isolationism is not the alternative to the domination of the financial institutions of the EU, and instead what is most progressive and emancipatory would be international solidarity action by the working class in order to change the EU into a socialist Europe.

Secondly, it was always a myth to conceive of the EU as a progressive alternative to reactionary forms of national capitalism such as Thatcherism. But it is also a myth to consider that the EU is more reactionary than national political forms because of the events in Greece. The point is that the EU is a contradictory organisation. It is progressive to the extent that it has unified Europe in relatively democratic terms and therefore has the potential to become a socialist United States of Europe because of the prospect of international working class action. The EU also represents the international development of the productive forces and the potential for a unified socialist economy. But it is also reactionary in the sense that it is dominated by the political elites that advocate policies that favour the interests of capital as against those of labour. Consequently instead of making the historically retrogressive call for national withdrawal from the EU we should aim to develop a strategy that resolves the contradictory opposites of the EU in a progressive manner by international working class action.

Thirdly, the circumstances in Greece and the UK are different. In relation to Greece, Syriza have been trying to persuade the EU of the rationality of their anti-austerity approach. But in the UK, the forces of opposition to the EU are anti-working class and are right-wing Tory MP’s, plus UKIP. This point is acknowledged by Owen Jones, but he suggests that is possible to develop a distinct left-wing campaign for withdrawal from the EU: “Such a populist campaign could help the left reconnect with working class communities it lost touch with long ago. My fear otherwise is repetition of the Scottish referendum: but this time instead of the progressive SNP as the beneficiaries, with UKIP mopping up the in the working class communities as big businesses issue chilling threats about the risk of voting the wrong way. Without a prominent Left Out campaign, UKIP could displace Labour right across the northern England. That would be the real vindication of Ukippery.”(14) This view that a distinctive left-wing campaign is possible represents an illusion. The greater material and ideological resources of reaction mean that the voice that will be loudest in calling for withdrawal from the EU will be that of UKIP. The left wing will be considered to be basically irrelevant and the prospect of popular support for its standpoint will never occur. It will also be difficult to uphold the principle of the free migration of labour when the major reason for people supporting withdrawal from the EU is in order to end immigration. The only effective alternative to the international possibilities represented by the EU will be the promotion of a fortress UK. (Or, is that England?) This situation will represent a ‘carnival of reaction’, and the prospect of the possibility of socialism will be distinctly unfavourable. However, even if socialism in one country did occur it would express an historical anachronism in the form of a siege economy.

In other words instead of responding to the events in Greece in the form of superficial moral outrage it is necessary to recognise how the situation in the UK is vastly different. Only if the left-wing makes an emphatic call for a yes vote can we differentiate ourselves from UKIP and express a confidence that the working people can support principled views advocated in an intransigent manner. Instead Owen Jones expresses a form of pessimism that effectively argues we must capitulate to the views of UKIP. It is interesting that he presents no constructive views that would differentiate the left-wing from UKIP. Instead he implicitly suggests the formation of a left-right alliance. This is presented as the basis of the beginning of the popularity of the left. Instead the actual result is that the left wing will have been disgraced. We can only uphold the principles of internationalism and socialism if we advocate a yes vote. Instead Jones seems to consider that ‘Little England’ nationalism is compatible with the programme of socialism. This assumption actually represents betrayal and the adoption of ‘defence of the fatherland’ in the name of renewal and relevance. The actual Marxist left should reject his opportunism.

THE SITUATION IN GREECE

The Greek Parliament has reluctantly accepted the austerity plan of the EU. This situation creates the conditions for Syriza to call new elections in the next few months. These elections would represent a new referendum about the policies and actions of the government. It would be in the interests of the Greek people to indicate that despite disappointment they still have confidence in Syriza. However, if Syriza was re-elected it would become the administrators of the austerity plan of the EU. This situation would represent the fact that it had been defeated and was unable to achieve success for its opposition to austerity. In this situation the most principled position for it to adopt would be to consider the repudiation of the national debt and to begin the creation of an international struggle against austerity. However it would be a mistake for Syriza to reject the necessity of short-term elections and to become reconciled to the task of administering austerity. This policy would quickly alienate the Greek people and possibly create mass discontent that would actually make elections inevitable. The present task is to re-establish the links between Syriza and its supporters. This can only be realised by acceptance of elections in the near future.

The pessimistic approach of Weekly Worker can only conceive of events in terms of defeat: “The bailout plan signed up to by Tsipras represents a humiliating capitulation to the demands of the European leaders.”(15) The implicit assumption is that there was an alternative to the plan imposed by the EU. However, Ford does not outline what this alternative is, or how negotiations could have been carried out differently. The point is that Syriza was undermined by the balance of class forces which favoured the interests of the EU. Ultimately there was not an alternative to the stringent conditions imposed by the EU because of the fragile economic situation of Greece and the fact that the alternative of a siege economy and leaving the Eurozone would just have made things worse. Consequently Syriza had no alternative than to justify a retreat, and accept defeat. Defeat is not something to be ashamed of if the prospect of victory is too difficult under the given circumstances. However, the Weekly Worker instead of blaming the EU for the imposition of austerity emphasised the limitations of Syriza: “For us communists, serious questions are raised about the all those on the Left who made Syriza a ‘sister party’………..Almost all of the soft/reformist left closely identified with Syriza, foolishly saying they would carry out the same programme if given a chance – thus attaching themselves to inevitable failure.”(16) This immature emphasis on the limitations of Syriza because of its defeat does not amount to revolutionary criticism. What is more important is to locate criticism within the context of solidarity with Syriza. We should criticise it within the context of support for its aim of attempting to promote an anti-austerity programme as the answer to the problems of the Greek economy. In this manner we should recognise the dilemmas generated by the negotiations that occurred between the Greek government and the EU. Hence we ought to share the regret that has been created by the defeat of the aims of Syriza. This expression of solidarity is more principled than the sectarian stance of predicting inevitable defeat and effectively relishing the humiliation caused by the retreat of Syriza. Instead of this infantile ultra-leftism we should advocate a strategy that could have advanced the cause of Syriza despite its limitations. We should not utilise these limitations as a pretext for a failure to provide basis solidarity in relation to the attempt to realise victory for the policy of anti-austerity.

Instead of this recognition of support for the struggle of Syriza and the Greek people, Eddie Ford concludes: “But Syriza could never deliver, for all its fine promises about ending austerity and ushering in the social democratic promised land. Never in a million years. What a contrast to the Bolsheviks in 1917. When they took power, they did not promise an easy road. Rather, to borrow a phrase, they offered “blood, toil, tears and sweat”. That is, they took power to prevent economic catastrophe and banked on the German revolution. They were honest with people – can you say the same about Syriza and groups like it.”(17) Ford outlines a subjective idealist version of the world in order to criticise Syriza. He seems to imply that they could have realised their aims but were prevented by internalised limitations. This suggests that Syriza exist in a world without constraints, contradictions and limitations. The nasty EU does not exist and is only an expression of delusions. But the reality is that the EU is able to act as an effective institutional obstacle that undermines the economic programme of Syriza. The EU is able to impose its will on Syriza. This is the primary reason for the defeat of Syriza, and the leadership of this organisation has tried to explain that it has been forced to implement an economic plan with which it does not agree with. This is basic honesty that recognises a defeat has been imposed because of the pressures of the EU. The Greek government has been forced against its will to implement austerity. We could argue that if Syriza was a revolutionary party it should repudiate the deal and promote an international struggle against austerity. But Syriza is not revolutionary and instead it has acted in a principled manner as a left reformist organisation. It has not betrayed or deceived the Greek people because the anti-austerity plan was effectively imposed by the EU.

Ford also provides a romantic analysis of the early years of the Bolshevik revolution. He seems to forget that one of the earliest measures of the Soviet regime was to effectively retreat and sign the Brest-Litovsk treaty. A defeat, or retreat, was caused by adverse circumstances and the continued power of the German army. The result was the surrender of huge tracts of land to the Germans in return for a respite and a peace treaty. Many Bolsheviks believed that this treaty was a humiliation and capitulation to German imperialism. Lenin pointed out that the treaty was caused by an adverse balance of class forces and the greater military strength of German imperialism. In different circumstances Syriza has also been forced to sign its Brest Litovsk treaty. They should not be criticised for making a retreat under difficult circumstances, and instead we should continue to provide solidarity and attempt to make our own distinctive contribution to the development of the struggle against austerity and for the progress of international socialism.

Ultimately, Ford’s criticisms of Syriza are confusing because he applies the criteria of revolutionary principles when evaluating their actions. In this eclectic manner Syriza can never be considered principled, or even honest, because they predictably fail to realise revolutionary aims. Thus he does not analyse Syriza as a left reformist organisation, and instead it is defined as a party of perpetual betrayal and deception. Syriza is criticised because it is not a Bolshevik organisation, but the irony is that it never claimed to have this political character, and instead its aim was to introduce caring capitalism via the realisation of an anti-austerity policy. But Ford is not interested in this point, and instead he criticises it for not introducing socialism in Greece and for not promoting international revolution. In other words his criticism is completely voluntarist and ignores the balance of the class forces and the constraints represented by the EU. As a result of his sectarianism he cannot uphold a genuine united front and instead his effective desire is for Syriza to be humiliated. He has finally obtained his wish, but this sectarianism means that he is indifferent to the plight of the Greek people. Principled revolutionary criticism should be more generous than his approach, and we should be concerned not to argue that victory is impossible but instead combine optimism with realism. Our aim is to transform any national struggle into an international popular movement against austerity and for socialism. We should not have illusions in Syriza, but nor should we criticise them for not doing the impossible.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Eddie Ford: Euro leaders seek regime change, Workers Weekly July 2nd 2015, Number 1065

(2)ibid p3

(3)ibid p3

(4)Bruno Waterfield: Greece gets three days to make cuts or face exit, In the Times, Monday July 13th , 2015 p1

(5)Bruno Waterfield: Tempers Fray as Euro Chiefs tell Athens Bite the Bullet or Get Out, in Times op cit p8

(6)Eddie Ford: Austerity in a Modified Form, Weekly Worker July 9th 2015, Number 1066 p4

(7)ibid p4

(8)ibid p4

(9)ibid p4

(10)Arthur Bough: Divorced From Reality, Weekly Worker July 9th 2015, number 1055 p5

(11)ibid p5

(12)ibid p5

(13)Owen Jones: The Left Must Now Campaign for Britain to Leave the EU, Guardian 15th July, 2015 p31

(14)ibid p31

(15)Eddie Ford: Berlin turns Greece into a debt colony, Weekly Worker July 16th, 2015 number 1067 p11

(16)ibid p11

(17)ibid p11