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## Greek Voters Have Tossed a Grenade

Where's the US 'Syriza' Party?

by DAVE LINDORFF

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There is certainly exciting news from Greece today, with confirmation that the leftist coalition party Syriza has won a decisive victory, and, with the help of just one small party, the Independent Greeks Party, is assured of a parliamentary majority. That means Syriza's dynamic marxist leader, the 40-year-old former student radical Alexis Tsipras, will shortly become Greece's prime minister, pledged to undo years of crippling austerity and to turn Greece back into a real democracy, instead of a scene of corporate pillage.

Leaders of Europe's corrupt parties — both conservative and socialist or, in Britain's case, "New Labor," — are clearly anxious at the electoral success of a genuine leftist party in one of the countries of the European Union, particularly as there are growing leftist movements in larger countries, including Italy, Spain, France, Portugal and elsewhere. These new movements explicitly reject the tired and corrupted duopoly of conservative and socialist parties that have been taking turns running Europe as an adjunct to the US for generations.

It remains to be seen how the main governments in Europe, and particularly in Germany, try to deal with the new political reality in Greece. They and the bureaucrats and bankers in Brussels, Luxembourg, London, Paris and Bonn, are in a tricky spot: if they simply thumb their noses at Greece's new leaders, refuse to reduce that country's crushing debt, and force Greece to quit the

Euro currency zone, they will encourage other countries — notably Spain and Italy — to consider quitting the Euro too, and the whole notion of Europe as a political/economic entity will founder. If they accommodate Syriza's demands for a better arrangement, with debt forgiveness and aid to promote the Greek economy, they will be hit with similar demands from the much larger struggling economies of Italy and Spain, not to mention other troubled members of the EU like Portugal, Ireland Poland and other countries from the former Warsaw Pact.

The main point in all this is that Greek voters have tossed a flash-bang grenade into the prevailing neo-liberal consensus that the way to "reform" economies is to impose austerity, cutting back on social programs, hammering wages, boosting unemployment, and privatizing long-public functions like transit, education, roads and bridges and health care. Europe will probably never be the same, whichever way Greece ultimately goes.

The question is, will any of this matter in the US?

Certainly the same condition prevails here in the US that has prevailed in Europe, only here the corruption of the two-party duopoly is far more advanced, the mechanics of democracy are more degraded, and the austerity imposed on the broad public, as well as on the poor is far, far worse than in Europe. There a legacy of socialist policies from the post-World War II era that continues to offer at least some protection in the form of longer and more generous unemployment payments, free or low-cost higher education, nationalized healthcare schemes of one kind or another, generous retirement programs, quality public transit and often subsidized housing so that poverty is not as grinding as it is on this side of the Atlantic.

In the US, we have only the barest minimum of social programs, often referred to tellingly as a "safety net" rather than a support system — and as a "tattered" safety net at that. With US real unemployment still stuck at 18-24 percent, depending upon whom one is counting — a staggering tally of suffering and despair that actually rivals that in Greece — with the government cutting back on food stamp support, and with actual welfare programs largely gone, limited as they are to a lifetime maximum of five years, the poor in America, who now number 50 million (about 15 % of the population), are struggling just to survive, with little expectation that they or their children will ever see their lot improve. Meanwhile, as the *New York Times* reports today, the middle class, which the two capitalist parties (and most recently the president in his State of the Union speech) are fond of touting as the "bedrock" of American society, is continuing to shrink, falling from 53% of the population in 1967 to 45% in 2000 and to just 43% in 2013. And that's not because people in the middle, defined as households earning between \$35,000 and \$100,000 per year, have moved up into the high-income bracket. It's because they've been falling into poverty, defined in this report as earning less than \$35,000 a year (slightly more than two parents working full-time at minimum wage could hope to earn).

Where, given this clear crisis faced by most Americans, is the US version of Greece's Syriza Party? Where too is this country's Tsipras?

Syriza — actually an acronym for the Greek words *Coalition of the Radical Left* — arose quickly to this position of power in Greece (it nearly won the last election), by bringing together a fairly disparate group of 13 radical and left-wing political groups and factions ranging from democratic

socialist and green-oriented to communist, trotskyist and maoist leftists and even some anti-European groups that might be considered more anarchist than leftist. It's remarkable achievement could and should provide an object lesson to the splintered and often obsessively dogmatic and "purist" left in the US, which has historically had a difficult time uniting around common issues that could help it actually achieve power. (Example: could carnivorous US socialists and labor activists link arms with vegan animal rights radicals, radical feminists with Catholic leftists who oppose abortion, anti-war activists with organized labor that includes unions in the arms industry?) Because if the goal is actually grasping power, and not just protesting, such challenging compromises are necessary to build a viable movement and viable political party that can mount campaigns, field candidates, and win elections.

Too much can be made of the importance of individual leaders, but then again, the importance of a charismatic leader in developing a movement can also be underestimated. Clearly Alexis Tsipras, as leader of Syriza, has captured the trust and the imagination of the Greek public, and that has helped to galvanize support for the party in its bold campaign to confront the bankers and bureaucrats of Europe and the International Monetary Fund.

Looking around the field here in the US, there doesn't seem to be anyone remotely like Tsipras at the moment. Both Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren might be considered contenders, but each has at least one crippling flaw. Sanders, an independent self-described socialist who represents the state of Vermont, while staying officially outside of the Democratic party (while voting with the Democratic Caucus in the Senate), is an honest and serious guy but has thus far consistently proven himself unwilling to stand against the massive trillion-dollar US military budget and the imperial foreign policy that it supports. He limits himself instead to decrying Pentagon "waste," when the truth is nearly the entire US military budget, equal in size to what the rest of the world spends on its military, is "waste." That is not an issue that Tsipras and Syriza in Greece have had to confront. (Not that Greece too doesn't have an outsized military, but the Greek military is not trying to occupy other countries or engaging in foreign military adventures.)

Warren, who represents Massachusetts, in addition to likewise being silent about the massive US military budget and its imperial ambitions, is also firmly embedded in the wholly corrupted and pro-capitalist Democratic Party. While her stance against the big banks is excellent, and appears to be heart-felt, she is kind of a one-pony show, not someone trying to upend the whole corrupt political and economic system.

It seems clear that if there is ever to be a real third-party left alternative to the centuries-long and ongoing democratic fraud of a corrupt two-corporate-party duopoly in the US, its leader will have to be someone new, unafraid to truly challenge the status quo, and the Establishment in Wall Street and in Washington, Arlington and Langley.

The Greeks are showing us the way. Many in Europe may soon follow. Will Americans eventually wake up and rise up too?