

Socialist Faces In High Places

Syriza's Fall From Grace And The Elusive Electoral Road

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As various segments of the US radical left begin planting their flags in the electoral arena, Syriza's recent fall from grace should serve as a stark reminder of the unfulfilled promise of the electoral road to socialism.

Syriza's rise to power elicited widespread praise from the left internationally, inspiring renewed enthusiasm for the possibilities and promise of "mass left" party building in and outside the United States. At a rally celebrating Syriza's electoral victory in Spain, Pablo Iglesias, secretary general of the Spanish anti-austerity party Podemos, declared that "the sun of hope rose over Greece."

Yet "the sun of hope" began to set on Greece almost as quickly as it rose. Shortly after taking office, Syriza, the "Coalition of the Radical Left," formed a coalition government with the right-wing, anti-immigrant Independent Greeks (ANEL) party, followed only months later by the predictable surrender of the government to a new round of harsh austerity imposed by Greece's creditors.

Syriza's precipitous fall from grace echoes a long line of dashed hopes and broken promises on behalf of the Greek left in parliament. In 1981, seven years after the collapse of military dictatorship, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) rose to power in a landslide victory, capturing 48 percent of the vote, with the motto "National Independence, Popular Sovereignty, Social Emancipation, Democratic Process." Under the charismatic leadership of Andreas Papandreou, Pasok established a modern welfare state – raising wages, improving union rights and creating a national health system. After two consecutive terms in office, however, the popularity and left character of Pasok dwindled as it passed a series of austerity measures. Today, after multiple terms in power, Pasok is a shadow of its former self, widely blamed for the current economic crisis, rampant clientelism and political corruption.

The inevitable degeneration of the left in political power is often couched as a betrayal, as a "sell out" narrative of politically compromised leaders and parties falling victim to forces outside of their control. But the problem isn't that an individual politician or party has sold out; it's that they've bought into a project of political alchemy – the quixotic quest for the right mix of key ingredients that can magically transform the state into a vehicle for socialism.

However revolutionary the party, program or politician may be, no matter who you vote for, the capitalist state always gets in. To maintain their legitimacy and control, those who take state power effectively assume the role of general manager of capitalism.

The ability of the state to carry out its activities – whether it’s a “socialist” state, neoliberal democracy or a dictatorship – depends on the health of the economy, where the state draws its revenue through taxation. In other words, the state makes sure the right conditions are in place for capitalism to thrive, protecting and preserving private property, regulating capital flows, incentivizing certain businesses over others, and so on.

For those who dare disrupt this social order, the state also maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, both domestically and internationally. Syriza’s deployment of riot police to quell protesters only a month after taking office is one of many examples of the left using state violence to maintain social order. As Mikhail Bakunin once noted, “When the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called ‘the People’s Stick.’”

Socialist parties and politicians are not immune or exempt from fulfilling this role of the state. Greece is not a historical anomaly. In fact, the historical record is rife with socialist forces taking state power – by ballot or bullet – with high hopes and big promises, only to replicate many of the conditions they so adamantly opposed.

Once in power, socialist governments are particularly vulnerable to the disciplining forces of international monetary bodies and capital flight (as took place in Greece and other countries), an internal military coup, outside intervention by imperial powers or all of the above. These forms of power are unelected and generally operate independently of whomever happens to be in government.

Yet, despite the glaring limitations of taking state power, the lure of electoralism has not lost its luster on the radical left.

In the wake of Occupy and amid the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, a growing chorus of US leftists is beginning to sing the familiar song of electoralism, albeit in different keys. Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the election of Kshama Sawant to Seattle’s City Council have sparked a new round of calls for an independent “mass party of the left” in the United States, with some calling for a tactical engagement with the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign.

Advocates for a “mass party of the left” often point to the ability of electoral campaigns to shift public discourse. Yet recent history shows that our resources would be better spent influencing the terms of public debate through social movements. Within a matter of months, both Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter radically transformed public debates on capitalism, white supremacy and state violence – something decades of third party campaigns have failed to achieve.

Promoters of electoral strategies also claim that third party campaigns can and should complement social movements. While certain issues and movements are elevated by third parties that would otherwise be ignored by establishment parties, the demands of running left candidates tend to funnel limited resources from social movements into fleeting and mostly unsuccessful bids for public office. Also, what little infrastructure gets built on the campaign trail tends to dissipate quickly after Election Day.

For those who manage to win, the reality is that the vast majority, if not all, left parties that take state power become increasingly reformist, bureaucratic and ultimately concerned with preserving their position in power, which typically has the effect of demobilizing, defanging and developing a dependency relationship with social movements, not strengthening them.

While we need to struggle on many fronts, not all sites of struggle are created equal. The state is a shifting and contested site of power, one that plays a critical role in shaping the conditions under which we all fight, but ultimately it is a bureaucratic structure of top-down rule over society, not a vehicle for liberation.

The dismal record of putting “socialist faces in high places” shows that there are no shortcuts or quick fixes on the long road to liberation. Only by building power from below – in our schools, workplaces and communities – do we create the building blocks of a new world.

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