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[***Report from Greece: Preliminary Thoughts 30 September 2017***](http://stansburyforum.com/report-from-greece-preliminary-thoughts-30-september-2017/)

**MIKE MILLER *StansbuRY FORUM***

**Preface**

What I know about Greece and Greek politics can be put in a thimble, and probably a small one at that. So these observations and questions need that preface. As further preface, it is very difficult to apply lessons learned in the United States to anyplace else without contextualizing them in the new setting. That requires intimate knowledge of what is happening on the ground—so what follows are friendly speculations.

All the political Greek people we’ve met have been warm and hospitable in their welcome to us, Americans whose political and economic structures (government, financial and corporate), along with the European Union, European Bank and International Monetary Fund are largely responsible for the mess in which their country now finds itself. To be sure, there is complicity in past behavior and decisions made in Greece. But it’s not these macro questions that I want to consider here.

**Local People**

We (my partner Kathy Lipscomb\* and I) have now met with a public school teacher, taxi driver, waiter (who is also a university graduate in political science), tour guide, night shift security guard and a well known Greek actress ALL of whom blame Syriza ([“Who we are” – Syriza](http://www.syriza.gr/page/who-we-are.html#.WdpRxIZrzOY)) for the current mess, are fed up with politics and politicians (“they are all alike”), and think Syriza (has done nothing for the Greek people or, even worse, point to things Syriza ([Here](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/25/one-year-on-syriza-radicalism-power-euro-alexis-tsipras)) did (ignore the referendum results), or is doing (see below), that are making things worse.

We have also met with an internationally known political scientist who is active in Syriza, and who is interviewed regularly in various English language left journals, and a Syriza political appointee who is the national coordinator of municipal mayors. The two of them have elaborate explanations for everything Syriza has done or not done. The bad things, in their views, are for the most part the result of constraints imposed upon them by [The Troika](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/greece-crisis-who-is-the-troika-bailing-out-greece-10358047.html). They note good things that are done quietly, with no fanfare, under the radar. However, these seem to be so under the radar that none of the other people with whom we spoke mentioned them; indeed they said things that contradicted the claims. Our pro-Syriza informants also indicate that mistakes were made, but they believe these had more to do with Syriza strategy than with decisions that hurt the Greek people.

The clearest example of a bad thing is the story we were told about home foreclosures. There is a high percent of homeownership in Greece. Until recently, we were told, there was an ‘umbrella” that protected a home owner in his/her residence, though it didn’t protect additional property from foreclosure. Syriza, we were told, is responsible for removing the umbrella. Not only that, when the protection was first removed demonstrators appeared at the foreclosure proceedings making it impossible for judgment to be rendered. In response, Syriza made the procedure an electronic one. You now receive an e-mail informing you of the foreclosure as a “done deal”.

Another example we were given, Syriza is further eroding the pensions for which people paid during their work lives. That is a disaster for Greek retirees: there is only a public retirement system. Workers paid 18% of their wage into this system; employers paid 28%. The government has now more than once cut retiree payments.

What is the truth? We are in absolutely no position to tell. I can say with some confidence that not one of these informants was disingenuous; they firmly believe what they told us; none had a pre-disposition against Syriza and, in fact, most of them had been Syriza supporters, and voted for Syriza in the last election. Now, they told us, they either will not, or do not know if they will, vote. And, if they decide to vote, they have no idea for whom that will be.

Is there a way to understand these apparently opposing views of the same facts? There is clearly a participation and perception gap between people we met who were Syriza supporters and those now actively engaged in Syriza. In what follows, I use a framework that I apply in my understanding of what’s going on in the United States. Does the application work? Is it appropriate? I’ll leave that for the reader to decide.

**What’s Up?**

In a democratic and participatory union, workers may decide to strike because the offer being placed on the table by their employer is inadequate. They might conduct an effective strike, and still be stonewalled as far as any improvement in the employer’s offer. At some point, the workers might decide they’ve put up as good a fight as can be waged, and their own economic circumstances are such, or the increasing presence of scabs is such, that they have to end the strike, return to work, build their strike fund again (if they have one), and wait until the next round of contract negotiations to return to the negotiating table from a position of strength. These workers are not likely to blame their leadership for the failure of the strike. [The 1948 Packinghouse Workers Union strike](http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10104&context=annals-of-iowa) is probably a good example of what I’m talking about.

As every American trade unionist who cares about the future of the labor movement knows, what I just described is, for the most part, a memory of the past. It has been replaced by what people call “insurance policy unions”. You buy your insurance policy (pay your dues) and expect your benefits (advocacy—contract negotiations, and services—grievance representation). Thus the common phrase, “What’s the union going to do about ‘x’?” as if the union is a third party—separate from the member asking the question.

What’s all that got to do with Greece, Syriza, and electoral politics in general? It seems to me in the nature of politicians and political parties in formally democratic systems that the party adopts a program, selects its candidates, and then determines a strategy by which to convince citizens to vote for it and them. But “convince” in the modern era is a tricky word because what it really means is to sell buyers (voters) a product (candidates and their program—which might have little to do with what they actually do if elected). At best, during an election a door-to-door mobilization takes place in which the candidate’s volunteers ask voters to support their candidate. Reasoning is not what takes place at the door because the canvassers are instructed not to waste time with opposition and, at best, to spend limited time with the undecided. Campaign imperatives demand this kind of behavior: there is an election that will take place on an already specified date and a majority of voters is required if the candidate is going to win. This imperative makes mobilization necessary and organization unlikely once campaign season has begun.

It is not by accident that this kind of campaigning takes place. The gap between the political parties and their candidates, on the one hand, and the voters, on the other, is huge. More likely than canvassing, it is direct mail, social media and television advertising that are used to reach the voters (the market). In national campaigns this approach is built into campaign structures: campaign consultants, who are the principal operators of campaigns, are paid by a percentage commission on the cost of the medium used for reaching to voters. Door-to-door work gets almost no money because most of the workers are volunteers!

Even in a campaign that is heavily dependent upon volunteer effort, the contact with the citizen is a fleeting one, and the follow-up is typically electronic, not personal except for election-day when the favorable voter is contacted to insure his or her turnout.

Potential voters do not say about the candidates they support, “What are we going to do about ‘x’ (unemployment, student debt, immigration, etc)?” They want to know what the candidate is going to do about ‘x’. The very nature of the campaign process tends toward the separation of “the campaign”—candidates and their inner-circle, donors, leaders of key interest groups (whose members already think of their organizations as third parties), and activists.

The question then becomes, “How deeply rooted are these activists in the day-to-day lives of the various constituencies addressed by the candidate?”

My friend Herb Mills was chairman of a “stewards’ council” in the International Longshoremen’s & Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU). There developed under his leadership a widespread system of elected stewards at worksites. The stewards worked alongside other workers. There was little-to-no gap between them. They were the point of connection between a worker or a “gang” (a working group that unloaded cargo) and “the union”. There was no gap, no “what’s the union going to do about ‘x’?” question.

In my experience as an organizer, “the activists” typically lack the rootedness in constituencies in whose behalf they believe their candidate will, if elected, act. Frequently they are sociologically very different: young, instead of spread across the age spectrum; “Anglo”, rather then reflecting the racial/ethnic diversity of the constituency; college educated, etc. They are people with whom I might agree on a very high percentage of things they believe. But they aren’t people upon whom I would rely to engage in a continuing conversation with the voters after the election, especially if the person elected had to make a compromise that appeared to violate the platform on which s/he had run as a candidate. Thus the activist isn’t likely to be able, over the long haul, to “deliver” at the base.

**Greece Application**

Is any of this applicable in Greece? People who know that situation far better than I will have to draw those conclusions. I hope the questions and observations are useful.

I suspect that Syriza and its activists lack the kind of rootedness that is required for everyday voters to say about their plight, “What are we going to do to solve the mess we are now in?” Both our Syriza informants told us nuanced examples of how the organization is now supporting things like soup kitchens, community gardens, homeless shelters and other programs and activities to solve the problems of poverty. They also claimed that Syriza had expanded funding for education, and stopped some bad things from happening to pensions. They see Syriza as having an organic connection with the “social movements”. Yet the school teacher and her security guard husband made no connection between their volunteer time spent in a soup kitchen and Syriza. Similarly, other activities we heard about from our other Syriza-critics (retiree organizations and mobilizations, campaigns to save peoples’ homes, worker strikes, etc) do not seem to be viewed as an aspect of a larger movement of which Syriza is a part. Quite the contrary, Syriza is seen as part of the problem, not the solution.

In the U.S. I think there needs to be a vehicle for “we”, and it is not a political party because the dynamics of parties don’t lend themselves to the effective creation of “us”. Is that idea relevant in Greece?

One of our informants said that when her son arrived at the university to begin his studies there, nine different political parties had registration desks where he could join one of them. But there was no registration desk for a student union that enlisted the vast majority of students around a lowest significant common denominator program that represented their values and interests—for example their indebtedness and the almost 50% unemployment rate their age group faces. Similarly, there is no organization in the community that includes mothers’ clubs, soccer teams, retiree organizations, unions, interest groups of various types and others, and new groups that could be formed among the marginalized. Various interest groups engage in protest demonstrations, but only political parties seek to bring them together. Thus there is nothing outside the electoral politics process capable of defending and advancing a program, and effectively demanding of politicians that they implement it.

Is something like that possible and/or desirable in Greece? I’ll wait to hear from them on that question.

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**\*Disclaimer:** My partner Kathy doesn’t agree with all that’s said above. These are my views alone.

Readers of ***Stansbury Forum*** might want to look at my earlier post, [“Syriza Prompted Musings”](http://stansburyforum.com/syriza-prompted-musings/).

For readers who would like to dive further into Mike’s thinking about Greece, write him @ mikeotcmiller@gmail.com and ask for “Reflections on Greece”.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mike Miller**

Mike Miller’s organizing background includes the early student movement at UC Berkeley, field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1962-end of 1966), directorship of a Saul Alinsky community organizing project (1967-68), and a number of subsequent organizing projects. His articles on organizing have appeared in Social Policy, CounterPunch, Dissent, Socialist Review, International Journal of Urban Planning and Reseearch, Organizing, and The Organizer. He is author of Community Organizing: A Brief Introduction, A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco, co-author of The People Fight Back, and co-editor of the recently published People Power: The Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky. He directs ORGANIZE Training Center, www.organizetrainingcenter.org