# *Syriza Prompted Musings.* Mike Miller. *Stansbury Forum.* August 30, 2015.

***The Stansbury Forum is a website for discussion by writers, activists and scholars on the topics that Jeff Stansbury focused his life on: labor, politics, immigration, the environment, and world affairs.***

**Preface**

[Syriza](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/07/what-syriza-answers-more-complicated-you-think)’s defeat in its recent non-negotiations with the [Troika](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31098367) was disturbing, though not unexpected. From day one, I was the “pessimist”, according to my friends, arguing that major concessions would strengthen other left formations like [Podemos](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/06/spain-politicians-euro-crisis-greece-podemos) and encourage new ones, and for that reason would not be forthcoming from The Troika. My heart was hoping to be proved wrong; my head told me not to get my hopes up.

Nevertheless, this experience is an opportunity to raise some fundamental questions about the nature of the world in which we live and the people power that will be necessary to change it. Specifically, a democratically elected government with a firm mandate from its electorate to reject austerity was essentially ignored. Those who represent financial power, and/or are ideologically committed to austerity and “neoliberalism” imposed their will upon Greece.

**Questions**

**Question #1:** Was a “[Grexit](http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=Grexit)” possible? While several writers on the left argued that it was, I initially saw nothing that convinced me that Greece could go it alone. While I hoped someone would draw a persuasive parallel to what Iceland and Argentina had done, with a handful of suggestive exceptions I did not find it in my searches of the abundant Internet discussions on the subject. The Syriza parliamentarians who voted against [Tsipris](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33243579) didn’t seem to have a case, other than righteous anger, either.

**Question #2:** I initially asked, “Why didn’t Syriza have a contingency plan?” If public statements more-or-less reflected private thinking, there was no Syriza anticipation that there wouldn’t be a deal. In an early statement, [Yanis Varoufakis](http://www.theguardian.com/world/yanis-varoufakis) suggested that the negotiators were reasonable people, equally committed to a fair Europe, and that serious Keynesian proposals accompanied by necessary domestic reforms (tax collection, retirement and others) that wouldn’t further punish the poor and working class would provide the basis for an agreement.

(It now appears there was a “Plan B,” that never got further than a five-page memorandum from Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis to Prime Minister Alexis Tsipris. Varoufakis now says that he was not “authorized” to take steps to implement the plan. (More on this below.) At the same time, he and others indicate that in order to implement Plan B secrecy would have been required in order to prevent intervention by the Troika.)

**Question #3:** Why didn’t Syriza use the little leverage available to it in the EU when there was a vote to continue economic sanctions against Russia? As I understand it, such a vote has to be unanimous. Since it passed, I assume Greece’s representative voted for it, giving up the leverage his vote might have offered the Syriza negotiators. And wasn’t there an opportunity to float a new possibility: Greece joining with the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries giving them a presence in Europe?

**Question #4:** How could a Plan B be given legs without secrecy? In the subsequent Internet buzz around Plan B, critics say that Syriza/Varoufakis should not keep secrets from the Greek people. That’s more easily said than done. Let me tell a story from a different time and place to illustrate the problem.

In a major 1930s strike at a General Motors Fisher Body plant in Michigan, union leaders told their members a lie about where the sit-down (occupation of the plant) was going to take place. They knew company agents had infiltrated the union. The strike organizer used the infiltrators to send the company’s security guards and police to the wrong place so that the planned occupation could take place unimpeded. Should the organizer have told the members the truth, thus alerting General Motors to the tactic? I think not. But it is a difficult question: under what circumstances should a democratically elected leadership (or an organizer) lie to its people? And if there is a very good reason for secrecy, for how long can declining to tell the truth be justified? (Obviously in the auto plant case it was for a very short time.)

**Question #5:** Were Syriza negotiators’ hands tied by the contradictory [Greek polling results](http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jul/05/greek-referendum-no-vote-signals-huge-challenge-to-eurozone-leaders) that showed strong majorities for an end to austerity, and similarly strong majorities for not leaving the Euro? And, if so, why wasn’t there any campaign to diminish the latter in order to strengthen the negotiators’ position? Only at the last was there a referendum that clearly represented rejection of austerity—but it didn’t cross the bridge of abandoning the Euro.

**Question #6:** Why wasn’t there much, if any, international solidarity action? Why, for example, weren’t international longshore unions, which have a strong tradition of acting in solidarity with struggles that have no relationship to their “bread and butter” issues, asked to call a one-day refusal to unload German goods in the ports of the world? Within Germany, why wasn’t there a strong demonstration of support for the Greeks? (In fact, it appears quite the opposite was the case: polls suggest that a large majority of the German people supported [Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/germanys-finance-minister-believes-in-united-europe/article25570879/) — shades of the disintegration of international solidarity at the commencement of World War I.)

**Question #7:** Why wasn’t there massive non-violent disruptive direct action by the social movements within Greece that would both have strengthened the negotiators’ hands and precipitated similar action in other European, if not further, countries? Here let me quote at some length from [Leo Panitch](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/leo-panitch) who penned these words from Athens for the July 15, 2015 issue of *The Bullet.* (Panitch is no crazy sectarian—he is editor of the [Socialist Register](http://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/index#.VeNp6c6cxvU), a research professor at York University, Canada, and a long-time commentator on Canadian Broadcast Corporation radio and TV.)

*Not only the party but also the social movements were in a state of suspended animation from February to June as everyone waited for the outcome of the negotiations. This was not something engineered from the top. One very senior minister privately expressed to me his disappointment that the social movements he had expected to light a fire behind him had become largely immobilized. Indeed, the 20 page political resolution passed at Syriza’s refounding conference in the summer 2013 had concluded by saying that the party was not a slingshot that would impel its leaders into the state and leave them there but rather the enabler of a “diverse, multidimensional movement of subversion” without which those in the state would not be able to accomplish much by way of political, economic and social transformation. That there was little spontaneous evidence of this was no doubt a relief to some in the government; but to others it was troubling. There were especially some highly capable Syriza leaders who deliberately remained in the party apparatus in order to facilitate this. But the difficulty of doing this was not just a matter of the rest of the leadership’s preoccupation with the negotiations but also the lack of capacity among Syriza activists for animating the creative plans from below to which the state would need to respond.*

**Question #8:** Panitch says, “…some highly capable Syriza leaders [deliberately remained] in the party apparatus to facilitate” independent mass action. Why didn’t that action take place? The Devil is in the details: these leaders should have been outside the party apparatus, in leading positions in mass organizations funded by their members and the Greek people, accountable to these movements. When John L. Lewis, leader of the 1930s emerging industrial union movement, confronted General Motors, Lewis-ally Frank Murphy, then governor of Michigan, told Lewis he would have to use the National Guard to remove the workers from their sit-down strike. Lewis responded that the sit-down would continue, and that he, Lewis, would stand in the GM plant window so that his body would be among the first to fall from bullets aimed at the strikers. Murphy backed off; the strike was won. Who was there to hold Tsipris and Syriza’s feet to the fire? (By the way, I’m well aware of Lewis’ undemocratic practices in his own union.)

**Question #9:** Is neoliberalism so dominant internationally that even Keynesianism is fringe radicalism? To read the press in the United States, with the exception of Paul Krugman’s regular op-ed column in the *New York Times* and a few others, one would think so. It did not matter that Syriza was not proposing a “socialist” solution. They were “radical”, “immature”, and “unreasonable” anyway. Ironically, Germany has abundant government interventions in its domestic “free market”; evidently the Greeks don’t deserve the same. Are we in a truly hegemonic world context totally controlled in the essentials by multi-national financial and corporate institutions rather than the tenuous, and in flux, world suggested by [Immanuel Wallerstein](http://iwallerstein.com/), a highly regarded scholar?

**Question #10:** This one is of a different nature, and has to do with Greece’s complicity in its mess. Who is responsible for the failure to collect taxes, especially the taxes on the wealthy? Are there pension abuses that are indefensible? The question of complicity is the one usually raised by conservatives and thus, and also usually, dismissed by liberals and radicals. But that’s not good enough. This is a much broader question, and applies in depth, for example, to the question of corruption in Africa, Mexico and other emerging nations around the globe.

**A Note on Electoral, Legislative and Regulatory Agency Politics**

The role of electoral politics, in particular, in building mass organization and movement raises thorny and unresolved questions. I’ve been around long enough to remember being told that the Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, Jesse Jackson and other Democratic Party campaigns, as well as third party efforts like those of California’s Peace and Freedom Party and the Green Party would help “build a movement”. To the best of my knowledge, none of them did, for two reasons. First the logic of running major electoral efforts is one of “mobilization”, not “organization”. Second, in every case of which I’m familiar, the candidate has called the shots in how the campaign should be run, not those who think they can build a movement out of it.

In the case of Syriza, Varoufakis says he presented a five-page contingency plan to Tsipris and failed to get his authorization to put legs on what was at that point simply a memorandum. So I don’t think any of us is in a position to know whether the Greek economy could have survived the process of dropping out of the Euro and returning to the Drachma. Everything now written on that question is mere speculation reflecting the initial bias of its author.

But we can know something about the politics of the conflict between Syriza and a majority of the Greek people, and The Troika. Everything was controlled by the “parliamentary party”, rather than in partnership with the independent mass-organizations/mass movement. The leadership of the outside forces evidently completely deferred to Tsipris and the parliamentary leadership on the question of organizing mass domestic and international support for debt relief that coordinated with what was going on at the negotiating table, but was separate and independent of it (what I call an “outside/inside strategy”).

Syriza claimed that it understood the necessity of the mass movements remaining autonomous; there seems to be no evidence of that. In the absence of a mass non-violent disruptive direct action campaign aimed at German banks and other appropriate targets, with the addition of support from longshore unions that might have refused to unload German products, with the addition of some kind of international boycott aimed at carefully targeted products, we have no way of knowing what might have been won at the negotiating table. Further, the contradictory ideas of getting substantial relief and remaining in the Euro community might have been reconciled in the course of such a campaign. Campaigns move people; polls are only static pictures of where they are at a specific moment in time. A campaign might have changed the Greek people’s collective mind about remaining in the euro.

It appears that Syriza thought “reason” was going to prevail–the occupational hazard of having academics and intellectuals at the center of your policy-making who are accountable only to themselves. (As earlier noted, I told friends from day one that the Troika was not going to budge because if it did it would strengthen Podemos and all the other left forces now emerging in Europe.)

All we got was an ad hoc mobilization called at relatively the last minute by Tsipris and the Syriza central committee, as distinct from a mobilization by the mass organizations that was part of a six month campaign to defeat neoliberalism. When leadership is centered in the parliamentary party rather than parallel and with the mass organizations, that’s the result you get. (In California, in the Electricity & Gas for People Campaign, all our Sacramento [the state capitol] allies–both legislators and public interest advocates–told us not to have a mass action to support lifeline legislation. We did it anyway. Afterward the very same allies told us the action dislodged the bill from being stuck in committee, and moved it forward. It’s not international, but it’s a parallel experience.)

**Conclusion**

We lack the mass-based, multi-issue/multi-constituency organizations that have the capacity to engage in sustained struggle with corporate/financial power and win. With some relatively timid exceptions, we have little experience in the last 50-or-more years with mass-based organization. Rather, our experience is with mobilizations that momentarily capture attention and may temporarily paralyze the status quo with disruptive direct action. Think here about Occupy. Contrast it to the industrial unions of the 1930s that both could call upon members to engage in militant action with little fear of major defection, AND that had broad support among the people in the rest of the country, AND that remained in existence after the mobilizations were over. Mobilizations that are unconnected to mass organization may win particular battles, often important ones. They have not changed the relations of power that is a pre-condition for major economic victories over poverty and deprivation, let alone restructuring of the economy as a whole.

Mass based organizations have a number of strategic expressions which are central to their ability to act with power:

**1)** Economic action: strikes, boycotts and corporate campaigns that have specific targets and are supported with deep commitment by workers at a specific workplace or a community constituency that is directly affected by a targeted corporate actor.

**2)** Mass, nonviolent, disruptive direct action, the purpose of which is to demonstrate that “business as usual” will not continue so long as a particular wrong isn’t righted, and to bring an adversary to the negotiating table where concessions can be won *and a negotiating relationship established*. The latter alters the relations of power.

**3)** Public shaming that is designed to isolate a target from his or her social and cultural environment; these are tricky but can be highly successful. A CEO of a corporate exploiter can be publicly shamed at a place of worship. But it’s important that this be done in a way that doesn’t lead peers to rally behind the target. Instead, the tactic’s aim is to isolate the target from his/her community.

**4)** Alternative institutions that can be as small as a neighborhood buying club or as major as the [Mondragon system](http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/co-operative-experience/our-principles/) of cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. They include bartering, pooling resources, credit unions, burial societies and a host of other mutual aid approaches that deepen interdependence and a sense of community among people.

**5)** Member Benefits are the result of having the economic power to negotiate as a group. Some unions have taken this so far that they seem to be dictated to by their benefits. But that is not a necessary result of using your numbers to get lower prices on everything from the stores on a neighborhood street to an insurance company or a health maintenance organization.

**6)** Advocacy for members. This, like member benefits, is a service that is provided for members—but with this twist: the advocacy is done by groups of members, not by a lawyer or some other professional. Thus advocacy becomes another tool to build the self-confidence and civic competency of members and leaders. This approach can be applied every time an individual is getting screwed by an institution, ranging from an auto or health insurance company to a public agency.

**7)** Creation of a small “d” democratic counter-culture. Through internal processes of education, reflection and celebration a new story of everyday people as makers of history is created. Without this, the likelihood of the internal life of a mass organization replicating the patterns of deference of the larger society are impossible to overcome.

**8)** Electoral, legislative, regulatory agency and judiciary politics. These are but one of five strategic approaches available to a mass organization. Their use should also engage large numbers of people in the process, whether that be door-to-door canvassing and house meetings in an election, mass lobbying at a legislative or regulatory body hearing, or even the quiet display of many people showing up in a courtroom.

It is important to use the tools of mass action rather than “insider” lobbying or closed door negotiations that are isolated from the very people most directly affected by the outcome of these negotiations.

My own view is that engaging in the electoral arena is the last act in the drama of creating and sustaining social change that benefits “the 99%”, and significantly dismantles the power of the now-reigning oligarchy that seems otherwise impregnable EVEN WHEN it grants concessions.

All politics is local. All politics is global. The recently closed library in your neighborhood or town reflects the failure to have an equitable and just tax system at local, state and national levels. The passage of [NAFTA](http://www.epi.org/blog/naftas-impact-workers/) reflects the inability of progressive forces in hundreds of districts to hold accountable their members of Congress; ditto for the [Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-p-hoffa/chinas-currency-manipulat_b_7998236.html).

The specific issues that engage people in a mass-based organization must be immediate and specific. Proposed solutions must be believable and winnable in a relatively short period of time. These issues are what shift people from non-participation to engagement. These campaigns are essential if we are to reach beyond the choir, the activists who now can be counted upon to show up for a demonstration.

Once engaged in a lively organization that builds community around values of human dignity, justice, equality, security, democracy and freedom everyday people will be willing to undertake action on issues that require lengthier campaigns because these campaigns more deeply challenge entrenched power. A relative handful of people can shut down a neighborhood store that carries shoddy merchandise and refuses to accept returns. A large number of people are required to make Wells Fargo Bank and the other big banks stop the foreclosures that resulted from their bad loans.

Action on global issues has to be translated to local targets. If a successful mass movement, comprising mass-based organizations around the world or at least around the country, is to be built its targets have to have local actionable handles so that local people can win agreements without waiting for some national or international victory. For example, even a block-club can get a boycotted product off the shelves of the neighborhood corner grocery. Or a local city government can decide to move its funds from a bank or disinvest from a polluter.

In the absence of such formations, I fear that we will continue on the downward course the world has embarked upon. Whether it is climate change, diminishing potable water, growing concentration of wealth and power in an ever-smaller financial and corporate elite that is targeted for change, the result will be defeat.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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, the liberal democrat, Socialist Review, International Journal of Urban Planning and Reseearch, Organizing, Shelterforce, Poverty & Race Research and Action Reports, Race, Poverty and the Environment* 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](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org)

[The above has minor corrections to the originally-published article.]