General strike, spreading protests rock Greek government

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Yesterday's one-day general strike paralysed much of Greece, while 10,000 marched in Athens against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis.

Flights were halted by the walkout of air traffic controllers, and the country's public transport network was largely shut down. Railways, metro and bus lines, and coach services ground to a halt. Schools, banks and hospitals were also affected.

There were battles between police and youth on the main demonstration as well as outside the central courthouse where two officers involved in the fatal shooting of student Alexandros Grigoropoulos were testifying. High school students chanted "Cops! Pigs! Murderers!" Riot police fired tear gas at demonstrators advancing on the parliament building in Athens. Many shops stayed closed and boarded up their windows.

A group of around 100 Roma attacked a police station in the suburb of Zefyri. Clashes broke out during demonstrations in Thessaloniki, Kavala and Patrus. Two universities in Athens remain occupied. University teachers have been on strike since December 8 and high school and primary school teachers have struck since December 9.

In Athens, officials estimate that more than 200 stores, 50 banks and many cars have been damaged. The Athens Traders Association estimates that the previous four days of rioting have caused €1 billion ($1.3 billion) in damages.

Stathis Anestis, spokesman for a federation of private sector unions, said, "Participation in the strike is total. The country has come to a standstill."

The strike was scheduled some time ago by the Greek General Confederation of Workers (GSEE) and the Civil Servants Supreme Administrative Council (ADEDY), representing 2.5 million workers—half the Greek workforce. It was called to press demands for higher wages, pensions and social spending and to protest austerity measures. But it has become bound together with the massive popular reaction to the killing of Grigoropoulos, which has become a focus for widespread anger toward both the police and the Karamanlis government.

Karamanlis and the New Democrats are hanging onto office by a single seat in the 300-member parliament. His government has agreed to give €28 billion to the bankers, while cutting social services and pensions and forcing through privatizations. He has blamed the protests on the "enemies of democracy" and said there will be no leniency for the rioters.

Amnesty International has called for the Greek authorities to end the "unlawful and disproportionate use of force by police" and noted "mounting evidence of police beatings and ill-treatment of peaceful demonstrators."

The leader of the opposition Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), George Papandreou, has called for early elections, but he has done so on the grounds that the government has proven incapable of defending the public from protesters. "This government is unable to protect the public from anarchy," he said.

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) also denounced "the blind violence of the hooded people." One Communist Party leader accused the opposition Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), made up of various dissident Stalinist and radical groups, of "indulging" the anarchists.

Fresh elections would have the aim of stabilizing a situation that is spiralling out of control. With unemployment at 15 percent, forcing many to emigrate in search of work, social anger, especially amongst the

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young, is visceral.

Zoe Albani, a psychologist and youth counsellor at the IEKEP institute, told the *Guardian*, "There's so much frustration among the young people, so much anger, rage. So many dreams that can't be realized. If any of them get a job, they earn €500 a month. You can't live on that. By the time they're 26 or 27, they're still living at home. You want to have kids, but you can't afford to."

Christos Kittas, who resigned as dean of Athens University after the rioting spread to campuses, told the *Independent*, "Everyone has let our children down. Every day, I see that students are becoming more hostile toward us and towards figures of authority."

Odysseas Korakidis, who took part in the Athens protest, told Reuters, "There is demand for change: social, economic and political change. It's not unusual here to hold down two jobs to get just 800 or 1,000 euros a month. In other countries, that's inconceivable!"

"This is not just about the kids. It's about our dreadful education and economic situation. That's what pushed us onto the streets," one protester said. "It's our belief and hope that this is the beginning of a rebellion against the system."

A young woman told the *Guardian*, "I have two degrees but I am a waitress. There is no opportunity for young people here any more but I don't think this is confined to Greece. The economic situation leaves a lot of young people across Europe feeling bleak and hopeless."

More is at stake than even the stability of Greece. Several commentators in the British media have looked at the events of the past week and seen the shape of things to come elsewhere in Europe.

The *Guardian*'s Ian Traynor wrote, "As Europe heads into a winter of discontent, the bonfires of Athens could signal the first outbreaks of mass rage against the hard times beginning to feed fear and frustration across the continent."

He cited Thanos Dokos, the director of a leading foreign policy think tank in Athens, who explained, "People are frightened about job losses, rising taxes, no wage rises. The middle and lower classes are exhausted."

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard wrote in the *Telegraph*, "The crisis is much further advanced in Spain, which is a year or two ahead of Greece in the crisis cycle... The picture is going to get very ugly as Europe slides deeper into recession next year. The IMF expects Spain's unemployment to reach 15 percent. Immigrants are already being paid to leave the country. There will be riots in Spain too [there have been street skirmishes in Barcelona]. No doubt events will be ugly in Britain as well."

More politically revealing still, the *Guardian* warned not only of the impact of recession, but also the widening gulf between rich and poor in fuelling political and social unrest. It editorialized, "It would be one thing if everyone was suffering equally. But, of course, there are some people in Greece doing very well indeed, including those with connections to a government with a string of scandals, some of them financial, behind it...

"The more general lesson of these troubles is that unless governments are more attuned to the difficulties faced by their citizens, and particularly their younger citizens, they may well face similar but much worse times in the future, as the recession begins to bite. Greece's difficulties are not a product of the recession, the major impact of which is yet to come in that country. But that does not mean they are not a sort of model of what might happen elsewhere if governments go into the recession without a new emphasis on equality."

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