

Eyewitness reports police violence against Athens protesters

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The following account was submitted by a Greek student to the World Socialist Web Site

On Friday, December 12, a protest of 10,000 people filled the centre of Athens. People from every social background took part—students and high school students alongside their professors and their parents, but also many immigrants, unemployed citizens and even public service workers. They all took to the streets to express their opposition to the government.

Starting from the University of Athens, the protest proceeded from Stadiou Street to Syntagma Square and finished up in front of the parliament building where some minor clashes took place with the police. High school students staged a sit-down protest in front of the riot control police (MAT). When the bulk of the protesters arrived, the crowd made two attempts to enter the parliament building.



University students kneeling with their hands behind their backs as if they were prisoners

After a while the police provoked the crowd by picking out and arresting certain individuals. The crowd of demonstrators held their ground. Having had no success, the police sprayed the crowd with tear gas and, wearing gas masks, attacked the protesters. Fortunately, those caught by the police were able to escape with the

help of other students and some older men who yelled at the police officers (who were also quite young) that they "should be ashamed of themselves."

As the police intensified their attacks, the demonstrators withdrew to the grounds of the university. En route to the Polytechnio (National Technical University), one of the two universities whose students had organized the protest, police continued to provoke the protesters and grabbed people out of the crowd.

The Polytechnio is located in the Exarchia neighborhood, where the young student Alexis Grigoropoulos was killed over a week ago. It was the first university to be occupied by students on the very night of the murder.

Following the demonstration Friday, between 500 and 700 people gathered in the Polytechnio auditorium—students, unemployed, immigrants and public service workers—to discuss how to proceed. Those gathered stressed the necessity of maintaining the unity of the movement and not allowing it to be subordinated to parties that only sought to exploit the rallies and protests for their own electoral purposes.

The meeting then discussed how to support the high school students who are at the forefront of the demonstrations. Measures were discussed that would improve the exchange of information, ensure that the students remained organized and united and prevent them from getting arrested.

Public sector workers in attendance declared that certain municipalities have entirely closed down and that the workers involved were actively supporting the demonstrations. The meeting also discussed the dangers arising from a deliberate campaign by the media to isolate and break the opposition movement. This would no doubt be supported by and play into the hands of the government.

The students are calling on the workers' movement for support and demanding that those in its leadership who have close contact with and actually work for the government be sacked.

The demands raised included: punishment for those responsible for the death of Alexis Grigoropoulos, the resignation of the government, abolition of the "terror laws" and the police special forces, a ban on carrying weapons by the police, and the release of the 200 students arrested since the outbreak of the demonstrations.

The students have also advanced social demands, among them a call for the abolition of all private educational institutions, colleges and universities and free and unrestricted access to higher education. They are also insisting on the maintenance of the right to asylum in university buildings and property, first established in the course of the mass movement against the Greek military junta in 1973. The protests have also raised the need for decent, secure jobs and a reduced workweek.



Politicians surveying the conflict in Athens

On Saturday, December 13, a protest took place in the afternoon in front of the parliament building. Students from the high school attended by Grigoropoulos paid their respects to the slain youth.

Later on some university students protested in front of the assembled police lines, taking off their shirts and kneeling with their hands behind their backs as if they were prisoners.

Although the rally was peaceful, the government had brought in soldiers to protect the parliament and special officers armed with tear gas bottles ready to spray protesters. Despite the tense atmosphere, one student told the police, "We are not fighting you, we know you

are humans just like us, we are fighting against your uniform and the laws which you obey."



A protester stands before police officer with arms spread

Later the protest proceeded to Athens' Gazi neighborhood, and then Peireos Street, where police special forces were lying in wait. Two squads suddenly appeared behind the protesters and others came in from the side to close down the protest and arrest as many as they could.

On their route to Omonia Square, a small number of protesters attacked some banks and sought to dismantle closed circuit television systems used by the police to supervise the demonstrations. Contrary to media reports of widespread destruction, however, these were the two main targets of the protesters.

Those taking part in the daily protests are outraged at the stance taken by the Greek media, which concentrates entirely on scuffles between police and protesters in such a way as to depict an extremist image of the people protesting. The reports on the protests mention student protesters, but make no mention of the professors, teaching staff and parents taking part. Instead the newspapers concentrate on the damage to shops and the reimbursements that the government has promised to business owners.



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