

# Police attack protesters in Greece

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More than 10,000 people, predominantly youth, demonstrated in Athens on Sunday against police violence to mark one year since the shooting of the 15-year-old student Alexis Grigoropoulos by a Greek policeman. Protests also took place in the northern city of Thessaloniki and the port of Piräus. Further protests are planned over the coming days.

The police intervened with extreme brutality against protesters. In advance of the protest, the minister for civil protection, Michalis Chrysohoidis, announced, “We will not abandon Athens to the vandals.” Police were instructed to observe the demonstrations and, in the event of violence, show “zero tolerance.”

Just in Athens, at least 10,000 police were mobilized for Sunday's protest in the city center. Fighting broke out between police and demonstrators during the march and the windows of a number of banks and shops in Athens were shattered. Over 200 demonstrators were arrested.

The death of the 15-year-old on December 6, 2008 led to weeks of mass demonstrations and riots. The police killing, however, was only the immediate trigger for the protests. The broader background was the deterioration of conditions for students and lack of decent-paying jobs for hundreds of thousands of workers and young people, exacerbated by the rule of a political elite characterized by corruption and nepotism.

As a result of the protests a year ago, the conservative New Democracy (ND) government called for new elections on October 4, although the prospects for Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis to win reelection were dim. The early election was tantamount to a decision to transfer governmental responsibility and the task of dealing with the country's rebellious youth to the Social Democratic Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), which is backed by the trade unions.

PASOK was able to rely on the support of a number of nominally “left” organizations, such as the Greek Communist Party (KKE), the Greens, and the Radical Left (Syriza), which promoted PASOK as the lesser evil and even declared their willingness to participate in a coalition government.

After the election, PASOK and its leading candidate,

Giorgos Papandreou, were able to form a majority without a coalition partner, winning 44 percent of the vote and a clear majority of parliamentary seats. The so-called “left” had played a key role in supporting PASOK and diverting opposition from below.

Sunday's events show that the change of government has brought no shift in government policy. Papandreou has merely taken over where his predecessor, Karamanlis, left off.

The minister for public order is now called the minister for civil protection, but the police intervene against protesters with the same brutality as before. The trial of the two policemen implicated in the shooting of Alexis Grigoropoulos has been delayed and is now set to commence on January 20.

As the German *Frankfurter Rundschau* noted: “What is erupting here is the frustration, the despair of a new generation, which feels it has been robbed of a future.” Despite promises from politicians across the political spectrum, Greece continues to spend just 2.5 percent of its annual budget on education—the lowest percentage in the European Union. One in five leaving school is unemployed. At the same time, according to a study conducted by Transparency International, Greece leads Europe when it comes to corruption.

Greece's own internal problems have been compounded by the international economic crisis. Shortly before the October parliamentary elections, then-Prime Minister Karamanlis declared that due to the international crisis, Greece's public debt in 2006 would increase by 6 percent. When PASOK announced after the election that this prognosis had to be doubled to 12.7 percent, the European Union immediately demanded punishing cuts.

According to the estimates of the European Commission, Greece is now saddled with the biggest debt burden in the Eurozone—nearly 125 percent of the country's gross domestic product for 2010. Due to its declining financial status, the Greek state must pay higher interest rates for loans obtained on international financial markets, further driving up its debt. Last Wednesday, the EU finance minister decided to place Athen's budgetary policy under the

supervision of Brussels, considerably increasing the pressure on the government to make cuts.

The extent of the crisis of the Greek economy was discussed in an article in the *Financial Times*, which drew parallels between the situation in Greece and that of Germany in the early 1930s. “In Greece, there could be a repetition of the same catastrophic policy carried out by Brüning in Germany during the world economic crisis,” wrote Sebastian Wanke, south European expert for Dekabank.

The chairman of the Eurozone group, Jean-Claude Juncker, also expressed concerns over the rapid increase in state debt. The government in Athens must make additional efforts to regain control of the deficit, Juncker declared last Tuesday evening, following a meeting of the finance ministers of the 16 euro countries.

PASOK conducted its election campaign on the basis of pledges to oppose the neo-liberal policies of Karamanlis, increase national expenditure and combat rising unemployment. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, PASOK and Papandreou are now doing the exact opposite. Despite its declaration in the election campaign that it would introduce a more equitable social policy, PASOK is carrying out precisely the course undertaken by the preceding government.

Only few weeks after taking office, the Greek Social Democrats began implementing a series of major attacks on the population. Contrary to their pre-election promises, they are determined, in alliance with the trade unions, to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the working class.

Prime Minister Papandreou has declared his intention to “reform” the country’s entire pension system by raising the retirement age, increasing pension contributions and curbing claims for early retirement. These are just the preliminary measures to be taken by the government in the coming weeks and months.

The government also intends to freeze wages in the public service sector and step up the privatization of state-owned property and services.

Karamanlis had tried to sharply cut pensions, but was forced to change course in the face of massive public opposition. Papandreou is now planning similar measures, but this time with the close collaboration of country’s trade unions.

The two major union organizations, the GSSE and ADEDY, have already decided to support the cuts. They rejected a call for a general strike by the PAME union federation, which is linked to the Communist Party, and then agreed to take part in talks with representatives of the government and employer associations.

GSSE and ADEDY have betrayed Greek workers on a

number of occasions. Previous governments could always rely on the support, open or tacit, of both organizations when it came to the privatization of state enterprises or implementing welfare cuts. Their current support for the government represents a further swing to the right, which will inevitably bring them into a confrontation with workers.

The statements issued by the trade union leaders are almost identical to those of government officials. According to the GSSE head, Yiannis Panagopoulos, the economic crisis and the huge budget deficit mean there has to be “a public discussion about the problems in social security.” Greek bankers and corporate executives employ similar language.

The miserable conditions prevailing in Greek schools and universities are largely a product of PASOK policies. The party has dominated Greek politics since the end of the military dictatorship in 1974. It held power, with the exception of short intervals, until 2004.

In the 1980s, PASOK carried out a number of limited social reforms, combined with anti-European Union and anti-American rhetoric. However, in the 1990s—in common with other European Social Democratic parties—it began implementing drastic welfare cuts.

In 1996, the PASOK government led by Konstantin Simitis commenced a “reform” process centering on deregulation and the privatization of the public sector. These policies were carried out with the enthusiastic support of the trade unions. The conservative Karamanlis took up and continued these policies upon coming to power in 2004.

Now in opposition, New Democracy is preparing its own further shift to the right, and has elected Antonis Samaras as the new head of the party. The former finance minister, foreign minister and secretary for cultural affairs had spent many years in the New Democracy before breaking away in 2000 to found the extreme-right Pola Party, together with well known neo-fascists.

Shortly before the 2004 election, he returned to the New Democracy to occupy a position on the right wing of the party. As foreign minister in the 1990s he had already made a name for himself because of his insistence that the neighboring state of Macedonia could not be allowed to use that name. According to Samaras, this would amount to a “Slavic usurpation of Greek history and culture.”



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