

Hundreds attend memorial in Athens for Dimitris Christoulas

Julie Hyland
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On Saturday, hundreds attended a memorial service for Dimitris Christoulas, the 77-year old former pharmacist who killed himself with a handgun on Wednesday morning in Athens' Syntagma Square.

Mourners wept, read poems and letters, and chanted slogans that Christoulas was the victim of "political murder". After the non-religious service, they marched through central Athens to the square.

In his suicide note, Christoulas compared Greece's coalition government, which is imposing savage austerity measures at the behest of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, to the puppet regime of Georgios Tsolakoglou under Nazi occupation during World War II.

Stating that he would rather end his life with dignity than end up "scavenging through garbage looking for food", he called on young people to rise up and "hang this country's traitors in arms in Syntagma Square just as the Italians hanged Mussolini in 1945".

The pine tree under which Christoulas shot himself has since become a shrine, surrounded by candles and flowers, with notes stating "Down with the junta of the lenders". Spontaneous protests Wednesday evening by several thousand young people, on news of his suicide, were brutally attacked by riot police using tear gas and flash grenades.

Following Saturday's memorial, a group of protesters attacked a policeman, taking his bullet-proof vest and other items and burning them in the square.

In her eulogy, Christoulas' 43-year-old daughter Emmy described her father's suicide as "deeply political".

"My father's note leaves no room for misinterpretation", she said. "His whole life was spent as a leftist fighter, a selfless visionary. This final act was a conscious political act, entirely consistent with

what he believed and did in his life".

"Father, you couldn't put up with them killing freedom, democracy, dignity", she continued. "You paid with your sacrifice. Now it's our turn. Father ... We are 11 million and our name is Resistance".

Mourners said that Christoulas had intended his death as the start of a "Greek Spring", in reference to the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian vegetable seller who set himself on fire in December 2010, triggering mass protests.

That acts of desperate protest associated with opposition to despotic regimes in North Africa should be emulated in Athens says much about the state of class relations in Greece and throughout Europe. Christoulas chose to end his life only metres from the national parliament that has passed one round of austerity measures and wage cuts after another in the last four years, in return for bailouts that have benefited only Greece's banks and their international creditors.

As a result, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) has collapsed by 17 percent—unprecedented in peacetime. Official unemployment stands at 21 percent and more than 50 percent amongst youth. Public-sector salaries and pensions have been cut by more than one-third. Many thousands are now forced to rely on soup kitchens for food. Health care and medicine are in short supply.

Initially, the political elite sought to deny any connection between its policies and Christoulas' suicide. The offices of former PASOK defence minister Panos Beglitis were attacked when he claimed it was not possible to "connect his suicide with the country's current financial plight". He added, "Besides, we do not even know if he amassed debts or whether his children had a hand in it".

Subsequently, the government has sought to draw a

veil of silence—masquerading as respect over Christoulas’s death.

Pantelis Kapsis, a spokesman for the ruling coalition—comprising the social democratic PASOK, and conservative New Democracy—said it was a “human tragedy” but that it should not be the subject of political debate.

In his statement, Prime Minister Lucas Papademos, an unelected former banker, said, “In these difficult hours for our society we must all—the state and the citizens—support the people among us who are desperate”.

PASOK leader Evangelos Venizelos claimed that the suicide was “so overwhelming that it renders any political comment unbecoming and cheap”.

Such statements are deeply cynical. The ruling elite portray the social catastrophe being visited on Greece as a natural disaster, not one that they—in concert with international finance capital—have instigated deliberately.

Only last month, the government agreed to a new round of spending cuts and labour “reforms” in return for a second bailout. Even as Christoulas’s memorial ended, Venizelos said that further cuts could not be ruled out and that Greece would have to accept whatever terms were demanded by the European Union and International Monetary Fund.

The fact that Christoulas wrote he could not “find any other form of struggle except a dignified end” is a tragic indictment of the bankrupt policies of the trade unions and pseudo-left groups that have dominated protests in Greece, many of which Christoulas participated in actively.

While Christoulas’s suicide note speaks to the class hatred of broad masses towards the bourgeoisie and its parties, this is not a sentiment shared by these organisations. Since 2009, Greece has seen 17 general strikes against austerity—all limited to token gestures of one or two days and aimed not at overthrowing the government, but at reaching an accommodation with it.

Throughout, the pseudo-left groups such as the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), Antarsya (Anti-capitalist Left Cooperation for the Overthrow) and the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) have functioned as cheerleaders for the trade union bureaucracy.

These organisations are now seeking to divert

widespread shock and anger at Christoulas’s death into parliamentary elections, expected to be held at the end of April or beginning of May.

SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras urged workers and youth to turn their indignation into an “upset vote”, while KKE General Secretary Aleka Papariga said they should use the ballot to “lead the system to political suicide”.

Such statements are made under conditions in which the bourgeoisie in Greece and throughout Europe has made clear its contempt for democracy and public opinion—overturning and installing governments—and its determination to stop at nothing in defending the interests of the financial oligarchy.



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