

Greek government launches mass round-up and deportation of immigrants

Christoph Dreier
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Just a week after the Greek government announced €11.5 billion in new cuts in social spending, 4,500 police officers in bullet-proof vests, accompanied by Alsatian dogs, took to the streets of Athens to hunt down foreign-looking people.

Some 6,000 were taken into custody. Of those arrested, 1,400-2,000 were imprisoned and are set to be deported to their home countries.

According to eyewitness reports published in the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain, the police teams acted with the utmost brutality. Police are said to have randomly stopped foreign-looking individuals and packed them into windowless buses. After several hours, the officers searched them and checked their papers. Those who could produce a residency permit were released; all others were taken to police stations and a temporary detention facility near Athens.

Eight-eight Pakistanis were summarily deported on Sunday.

Other reports speak of humiliating scenes in which the victims had to spend hours kneeling on the ground. There are reports of violent attacks by police officers on detainees.

The representative of the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR in Athens, Petros Mastakas, pointed out that the police action violated the rights of immigrants. "It is very difficult, practically impossible, for asylum seekers to apply for protected status, and we are concerned that there may be among those arrested people who want protection but were unable to submit their requests," he said.

"Operation Xenios Zeus", as the mass deportation is called, is part of a broader campaign against refugees. Since April, there have been constant mass raids leading to arrests and deportations. In July alone, 819 people were deported from Greece.

By the end of the year, the government plans to build eight deportation camps where up to 10,000 people can be interned. Greece has not witnessed such mass arrests and use of prison camps since the Colonels' dictatorship of 1967-1974. At that time, thousands of workers and youth were arrested, tortured and shipped off to concentration camps on the islands of Leros and Gyaros.

The minister responsible for civil protection, Nikos Dendias of the conservative New Democracy, denounced refugees seeking asylum as worse than the German troops who invaded Greece during World War II. Speaking to Skai TV, he described them as "occupiers" who have turned the country into an "immigrant ghetto".

"We're losing the country," he said. "What is happening now is [Greece's] largest invasion ever." These words could have been spoken by a representative of the fascist party Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), which won nearly seven percent of the vote in the last election and is represented for the first time in the Greek parliament.

Chrysi Avgi, whose members use the Nazi salute and sport a modified swastika, have played a central role in witch-hunting immigrants. Reports of brutal attacks on immigrants by members or supporters of the party are growing.

There are close links between the security forces and Chrysi Avgi. The Greek newspaper *To Vima* reports that over half of all police officers voted for the fascist party. Recently, a member of Chrysi Avgi received the support of 41 deputies in the election for deputy parliamentary speaker. Since the party itself has only 18 seats, at least 23 deputies from other parties supported the fascists.

A report by Human Rights Watch from July raises the

suspicion that the attacks on immigrants are semi-official actions. According to the report, police officers often turn a blind eye when they are confronted with evidence of violence and even stand idly by when immigrants are assaulted. Undocumented immigrants are “routinely discouraged from making official complaints,” the report states. The police have told some victims they “have to pay a fee to file a complaint.”

The organization Expel Racism has received hundreds of reports of people being beaten up while the police stood by. According to anti-racism activist Thanassis Kourkoulas, police officers beat up immigrants in police stations, and local residents who complain about immigrants are given the phone number of Chrysi Avgi.

Operation Xenios Zeus has the backing of the European Union. For years the EU has criticized the lack of border controls in Greece. A significant number of illegal immigrants come into the EU via the Turkish-Greek border.

In 2003, the EU adopted the Dublin II regulations. Since then, a refugee who enters the EU without a valid visa can lodge an asylum claim only in the country of entry. This means Greece is not only committed to secure the EU external border, but also to prevent onward travel by asylum seekers to other EU countries. Under this regulation, immigrants have been repeatedly deported from Germany back to Greece.

The European Commission hailed the mass arrest of immigrants. “The Commission has encouraged the Greek government to improve their border management and to step up the controls at their borders for several months,” said a spokesman.

Operation Xenios Zeus is directed not only against refugees, but against the entire Greek and European working class. The anti-immigrant agitation and repression are, in the first instance, meant to serve as a reactionary diversion from the savage austerity measures being imposed on the working class and considerable sections of the middle class. In the face of mass popular opposition to the policies of the government and the Greek and European ruling classes, the bourgeoisie is seeking to “change the subject” and incite racism and chauvinism in order to split the working class.

The terrorizing of immigrants is at the same time

aimed at intimidating the working class, while strengthening the state apparatus and promoting fascist forces in preparation for mass repression against political and social opposition.

In Greece and other European countries, there is growing resistance by the working class to the austerity measures of the EU. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the trade unions and allied pseudo-left organizations such as Syriza and Antarsya to divert social anger into harmless channels. To continue the attacks, the ruling elites must turn to methods of open repression.

Just weeks ago, police violence was used to crush a strike by steel workers at a plant near Athens. Last Sunday the police attacked a demonstration against the construction of a gold mine in Halkidiki, using rubber bullets and tear gas.

The government recently made changes in the military leadership to ensure the loyalty of the troops. For years the Army has held maneuvers preparing the soldiers for the suppression of riots.

Greek and European workers must defend immigrants against the attacks of the government and the police. This is an integral part of the struggle against the austerity measures that are destroying the livelihoods of broad social layers.



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