

German chancellor Angela Merkel visits Greece

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The protests that took place during German Chancellor Angela Merkel's state visit to Greece on Monday reflect the explosive class tensions in Europe.

A force of 7,000 police drawn from across Greece assembled in Syntagma Square in central Athens to prevent protests and demonstrations by angry Greek workers. Despite this state intimidation, tens of thousands gathered outside the parliament building.

Before the demonstration, police indiscriminately arrested people identified as suspicious. Protesters were forced to pass through a series of identity checks.

Police snipers were positioned on rooftops around the square, as riot police repeatedly sought to provoke protesters and attacked them with stun grenades, tear gas and batons. At least 193 people were reportedly arrested. Police had originally attempted to prevent any mass gatherings in the city center, but ultimately permitted a demonstration in Syntagma Square.

Protesters carried placards saying "Get out, you are not welcome, imperialists," "Stop the Fourth Reich," and "Out of the EU and IMF." Some wore German army uniforms or burned swastikas. Many placards attacked the austerity measures the Greek government has pushed through in negotiations with the European Union.

Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (New Democracy) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a show of harmony at their joint press conference. "I want to thank you for the warm welcome," Merkel declared at the beginning of her remarks. "We are partners and friends."

She praised the Greek premier for the progress made in budget cuts, but also made clear that she expected Greece to fully implement cuts dictated by the EU. She then promised to open the way for the payment of EU

funds amounting to 30 billion euros which had been agreed earlier this year.

On Monday, euro zone finance ministers had issued an ultimatum to the Greek government: if the Greek cabinet failed to implement the cuts decided upon last March, payment of the next tranche of aid would not be made and Greece would be driven into bankruptcy.

International Monetary Fund (IMF) head Christine Lagarde declared: "Action means action, and not talk."

Concretely, the representatives of the troika (the European Central Bank, the IMF and the European Commission) demanded that Athens make further cuts in pensions, wages and social spending, totaling 14.5 billion euros. The so-called emergency loans provided by the troika will go to pay off Greek and international banks and speculators.

The German government has played a central role in enforcing EU dictates. Klaus Masuch of the European Central Bank (ECB) and Matthias Mors of the EU Commission, two of the three troika representatives in Athens, have direct links to the German chancellery. Berlin has repeatedly intervened directly to change troika decisions.

At the press conference, Merkel repeated the German troika representatives' demands: that Greece not only adhere to the cuts, but also make so-called structural reforms. This refers to new labor laws to cut wages, introduce longer working hours and shorter breaks, and decimate workers' rights.

These measures will enable corporations to enrich themselves at the expense of the Greek working class. Miserable working conditions in Greece will also serve as a lever to dismantle social standards across Europe. On Monday afternoon, Merkel met with representatives of Greek and German business circles to discuss concrete plans to this end.

The measures—implemented in the last two years by Greek governments and the EU—have already led to an unprecedented social catastrophe. Wages and pensions have been cut by up to 60 percent, and unemployment has soared to over 24 percent, with unemployment among young people topping 55 percent. In the past four years, Greece's economic output has fallen about 20 percent; the drop in GDP for this year was recently revised upward to 7.1 percent.

Following Merkel, the Greek premier called for pressing the offensive against the working class. "We are increasingly achieving our goals, and we will continue to do so," the prime minister declared, adding: "We are not asking for more money, and no special concessions."

All the social attacks in recent years have been carried out by successive governments that have worked closely with EU institutions. At the behest of the Greek financial elite, austerity measures have been imposed that have hit the poor and workers, while sparing the super-rich.

In recent weeks it has emerged that since the end of 2010, Athens has been in possession of data from 1991 listing Greek citizens with accounts at the Geneva branch of the HSBC bank. This list could have been used to track down tax dodgers. According to some estimates, Greek millionaires have deposited up to 600 billion euros in Swiss bank accounts—a sum far exceeding Greece's national debt.

The scandal surrounding the previously concealed data has revealed the close ties between the Greek political elite and the super-rich. Though the Finance Ministry had the data for two years, it was never handed over to the tax authorities. Newspapers have now revealed that at least 60 politicians from the ruling parties are listed on the USB stick containing the data.

According to the *New York Times*, there is another list with the names of 54,000 Greeks who have shifted 30 billion euros abroad since the crisis began.

This policy of enriching the financial elite at the expense of workers is the basis for the friendly meeting between Merkel and Samaras. The policy is no longer compatible with democratic rights. Instead, the European ruling class is introducing police state measures and authoritarian forms of rule.

When 350 shipyard workers demonstrated outside the Defence Ministry last Thursday, demanding new orders

and the payment of their wages, police attacked them with tear gas and batons. On Sunday, the police broke up protests by electricity board workers against tax cuts for the rich. Reportedly, 18 people were arrested and detained.

On Tuesday, the *Guardian* reported on 15 demonstrators who protested against the fascist *Chrysi Avgi* (Golden Dawn) party and were then arrested and tortured by police. Numerous reports have documented the close collaboration between sections of the Greek police and fascist gangs.

The ruling elite's most important instruments to break the resistance of workers, however, are the trade unions and pseudo-left groups, which seek to divert the anger of workers into harmless channels and promote illusions in the EU. These organizations are in constant contact with leading government and EU officials. Last Wednesday, the leadership of the country's largest trade union confederation, the GSEE, met for talks with the chairman of the Democratic Left (DIMAR), Fotis Kouvelis, a member of the government coalition.

Meanwhile, on Monday the chairman of the Coalition of the Alternative Left (SYRIZA), Alexis Tsipras, took part in the protests in Syntagma Square and proposed an end to the cuts. At the same time, he defended the EU—the main instrument of the financial elite to enforce these cuts. In an article in the *Guardian* on Monday, he called for strengthening European institutions and for creating a political union for the EU.

Tsipras was supported by German Left Party Chairman Bernd Riexinger, who also took part in the demonstration in Athens. The Left Party has not only gone along with the bank bailouts in Germany, but has also imposed social cuts in the states of Berlin, Brandenburg and North Rhine-Westphalia. It is therefore not surprising that Riexinger's main demand was a plea that Merkel meet with Tsipras for talks.



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