Mass protests and police violence in Greece

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As European Union leaders assembled in Brussels to discuss how to proceed with the euro crisis, tens of thousands demonstrated in Athens and other Greek cities against EU austerity measures and their disastrous consequences for the vast majority of the population.

In Athens alone, an estimated 80,000 workers gathered in different locations to march to the city's central Syntagma Square. The vast majority of railways, ferries and buses were hit by strike actions, as was air traffic. "Enough is enough," a striking water works employee told Reuters. "They've dug our graves, shoved us in and now we are waiting for the priest to read the last words." Other demonstrators chanted "Out with the EU and IMF!"

Thursday's protests were the third mass demonstration against austerity measures within a month. The last protests took place during the recent state visit by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel when more than a hundred thousand people assembled in Athens. Greek workers are obviously not willing to accept further cuts after two years of brutal social attacks.

The unions, which officially called the protests, had originally sought to limit them to small, decentralized actions. They were anxious to isolate the strikes by limiting the length of walkouts by workers in key areas of ??production or administration. The strikes at airports were limited to an extended lunch break of three hours. The leadership of the largest trade union confederation, the GSEE, met on Tuesday with President Karolos Papoulias to discuss the protests in detail.

In the past, the unions have tried to make strikes and protests as ineffective as possible. Ideologically, they have been backed by various pseudo-left groups such as the Coalition of the Alternative Left (SYRIZA), which has sought to divert all resistance against the austerity measures into harmless, EU-friendly channels. Once again on Monday, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras demanded on radio that Greece remain within the EU and negotiate appropriately within this framework.

As these organizations increasingly lose control over the protests, with masses of workers gathering despite the union strategy, the government has responded with naked violence against demonstrators. The *Guardian* reports that many protesters were not even allowed onto Syntagma Square. As thousands gathered anyway, 4,000 police used tear gas, stun grenades and truncheons to force protesters from the square.

The pretext for the state offensive was the actions of a group of masked individuals who threw firebombs and stones at the heavily armored police. This cat and mouse game is familiar to observers of earlier demonstrations and invariably serves to give the police grounds to intervene and clear the square.

This time, however, the police broke up the demonstration before it had properly commenced. The *Guardian* quoted a demonstrator who said that less than half of the marchers had reached the square before police began using tear gas to clear it. One 67-year-old protester died in the process. Greek media reported that he suffered a heart attack after being tear-gassed.

In recent months, the police have moved in aggressively to break up numerous strikes and protests by workers. At the same time, there is increasing evidence of their close cooperation with the neo-fascist party Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn) in attacking and intimidating workers and migrants. The brutal social attacks dictated by the EU are leading inexorably to the imposition of openly authoritarian forms of rule in Greece.

While police attacked demonstrators with tear gas in Athens, EU leaders began their deliberations in Brussels on the future of the EU and Greece. In the run up to the summit, sharp divisions had emerged between

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leading EU players, but at the same time all of the assembled leaders are agreed on the need to step up attacks on workers.

Prior to the summit, euro countries had signaled they were prepared to pay Greece the overdue installment of aid credits amounting than 31.5 billion euros, without which the country would be insolvent some time in November. In return, however, European leaders are insistent on the need for the Greek government to further enforce cuts and social attacks.

Not a cent of the promised billions of aid will end up with the millions of Greek workers and their families struggling to make ends meet. Many have not received wages or pensions for months. Instead, the “aid” will go directly into the vaults and accounts of the banks and speculators, whose deposits and profits are guaranteed. According to press reports, the German government proposed on Wednesday to transfer the emergency loans directly into a special account to which the Greek government has no direct access. This is aimed at preventing the money being used for any other purposes than the servicing of debt and interest repayments.

Although wages and pensions have been cut by up to 60 percent during the last two years, while mass taxes have been increased and unemployment has risen to over 24 per cent, the Greek government has largely agreed to the demands of the troika. It is once again tightening the austerity screw with further budget cuts of between 13.5 - 14.5 billion euros. These measures will involve additional salary and pension cuts of up to 20 percent and layoffs in the public sector.

The government has for some time sought to avoid this last step, not only because it violates the Greek constitution, but also because it destabilizes the state apparatus. A number of laws and edicts have not been implemented by administrators or their staff who disagreed with their content. According to the latest published plans, however, two to three thousand public employees are to be laid off before the end of this year, and 11,000 next year.

The troika had worked out this latest austerity package at the last moment and put pressure on the government by holding back payment of a credit tranche originally due to be paid in June. After the Greek government complied with its diktats, the troika then came up with a completely new set of demands which have less to do with budget cuts and more to do with the requirements of international companies and investors.

The new proposals include the extension of working hours, the intensification of shift work and the undermining of job protections. Although some government officials have announced that they are not prepared to fully support such measures, based on previous experience it is likely they will all be carried out to the letter.

This is the EU policy which is now being imposed on the Greek population by police utilizing tear gas and clubs. In order to fight back effectively against this onslaught, the priority for workers is to politically break with the pseudo-left groups and the unions that are trying to subordinate their protests to the very EU institutions carrying out the attacks.

They must adopt an international socialist program based on uniting workers across Europe to overthrow capitalism and establish the United Socialist States of Europe.

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