

Greek government bans demonstrations in central Athens

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The Greek government has used the visit on Thursday by German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble to impose a blanket ban on demonstrations in central Athens.

In order to enforce the ban, 4,000 police officers were mobilized to turn central Athens into a closed-off fortress. Roads and subway stations were blocked all the way from the airport to the city center. The ban on demonstrations was extended to include Syntagma Square, the central square in front of the Greek parliament building which has been the scene of regular protests and demonstrations during the past five years.

Despite these measures, there were numerous protests. After Schäuble had entered the Treasury, some young women gathered in front of the building and shouted “get out” and “Hitler out of here.”

Schäuble's visit took place one day after the Greek parliament passed the country's seventh austerity package in the last three years. The trip by the German finance minister was aimed at bolstering the Greek government headed by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras (ND) and ensuring that the cuts demanded by Berlin and Brussels be carried out in full.

At a meeting of the German-Greek Chamber of Commerce, Schäuble rejected proposals for a second restructuring of Greece's debts. Instead he made clear that austerity policies must continue unabated and expanded via the implementation of “structural reforms.”

The night before Schäuble's arrival, the Greek Parliament approved the austerity package, the seventh since 2010, to secure payment of its next tranche of credit of €2.5 billion. The package calls for firing 15,000 public employees, with 150,000 to be sacked by the end of 2014. The package was dictated to the Greek government by Schäuble and his European colleagues.

The package won the support of 153 of 300 deputies. After the withdrawal of the Democratic Left (DIMAR) from the coalition in June, the Greek government was left with a majority of just 5 seats. All of the opposition parties voted against the law, but DIMAR chairman Fotis Kouvelis stressed that his party agreed in principle to the cuts.

Greek Finance Minister Giannis Stournaras defended the mass layoffs, which he claimed should have taken place much earlier and not merely as a result of pressure from foreign creditors. He added that drastic measures were necessary to achieve Athens' goal of a primary budget surplus for 2013.

The main opposition party, the pseudo-left Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), sought to divert broad opposition to the cuts and to Berlin's role into blatantly chauvinist channels. At a SYRIZA congress held last weekend, SYRIZA Chairman Alexis Tsipras called on “patriots of all parties” to join SYRIZA.

On Thursday, Tsipras once again banged the nationalist drum, replying to Schäuble's visit by raising the issue of German reparation payments to Greece. He met with Greek President Karolos Papoulias to discuss the long-standing theme of compensation payments for the Nazi Occupation of Greece during World War II. The topic, Tsipras stressed, should not be “swept under the carpet.”

Tsipras' nationalist stance is a cynical ploy to mask his own subservience to the EU and the banks. This January, Tsipras made a special trip to Berlin to meet personally with Schäuble and assure the German minister that any future SYRIZA government would recognize Greece's sovereign debts and keep Greece inside the European Union (EU).

Schäuble and the German government bear direct responsibility for cuts that have had devastating social

repercussions for Greece. Schäuble personifies the policy of brutal austerity measures adopted by the European bourgeoisie against workers in all countries.

He has repeatedly insisted on the destruction of Greece's health and education systems, together with the cuts to wages demanded by the banks and speculators. With elections looming in Greece in 2012, Schäuble adopted the tone of a colonial master calling for them to be postponed. When the elections took place as planned, he made clear that austerity measures would be implemented irrespective of whom Greeks voted in, saying "it will not change anything, the Greeks can vote for who they want."

After discussions with Samaras and Stournaras, Schäuble declared that the EU would provide Greece with aid credits beyond 2014, on condition the country respect its previous agreement to implement comprehensive privatization measures and mass layoffs.

Given the catastrophic social situation in Greece, his proposal to provide small and medium enterprises with credits of €100 million is a drop in the ocean. The sum is a fraction of the monies Germany receives in interest payments on its previous loans to Greece.

A study published on Sunday shows that the birth rate in Greece fell by more than ten percent from 2009 to 2011. The number of stillbirths has risen by over 20 percent since 2008. The study explains this by the deepening economic crisis and continuous social cuts that have deprived up to 40 percent of the population of access to health care.

From the very start of the European crisis, Greece has been the model for the implementation of austerity measures across the continent. With the Greek political establishment and union bureaucracy increasingly discredited in the eyes of the masses, Athens increasingly resorts to police state measures to suppress opposition to its policies.

The Greek government has imposed martial law on striking workers on no less than three separate occasions this year and just a few weeks ago permitted riot police to invade the premises of Athens central university to dispel students. This was the first such police operation since the overthrow of the military junta in 1974.

The latest ban on demonstrations is a further step towards authoritarian forms of rule in Europe.



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