Greek government threatens university employees with martial law

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In the early morning hours of November 17, 1973 soldiers of the Greek military junta, supported by NATO, stormed the Technical University of Athens. They attacked workers and students on the premises and those protesting at other locations against the junta of the Colonels. At least two dozen protesters were killed.

Today, the Polytechnio is once again at the center of social and political conflict recalling the mobilization of the security forces against the Polytechnio four decades ago. Education Minister Konstantinos Arvanitopoulos (New Democracy) has threatened to place striking university staff under martial law if they do not return to work on Wednesday. He also threatened to use police to clear university buildings currently occupied by students and staff.

The Polytechnio and the larger University of Athens, together with other universities across the country, have been on strike for over ten weeks. Administrative workers are opposing the dismissal of over 1,300 employees in the government's so-called mobility reserve. Those affected will receive up to eight months reduced pay before losing their jobs completely.

The cuts to the universities are part of a wave of redundancies across public service. A total of 25,000 employees in hospitals, schools and offices are due to be transferred to the mobility reserve this year. By the end of next year, 150,000 public service jobs are to be slashed.

The latest redundancy plans have met with massive opposition. Last week hundreds of thousands of workers took part in a general strike against the layoffs. Strikes in hospitals, school occupations and demonstrations are a regular occurrence. On Monday, panel doctors began a walkout to protest job cuts.

Under these conditions the struggle in the universities has become a focus of social opposition. Solidarity is widespread. Up until last week, teachers had taken part in strikes for nine weeks in support of their colleagues in administration. At the Polytechnio students have occupied a total of nine buildings. Administration workers refuse to release the rooms and have blocked the main gates of the university preventing any teaching taking place this semester.

The government has increasingly responded to popular unrest by resorting to police-state methods. This year the government has already imposed martial law on no less than three occasions against teachers, sailors and subway train drivers. Police have forced workers to return to work and break off their strikes.

Ten days ago a court in Athens declared the university strike illegal permitting the government to use similar measures against university employees. The government already threatened last week to place strikers under martial law. On Monday education minister Arvanitopoulos said that workers would have to end their strike by Wednesday, otherwise he would send in the police.

Such police action is of historical significance. Due to the 1973 massacre, Greek police and military forces have been banned from entering the campus since the end of the reign of the Colonels in 1974. Against a background of growing social conflicts, the former social democratic PASOK government abolished the ban in 2011. Since then there have been some police interventions on the campuses, but nothing like the action announced by Arvanitopoulos.

This move is part of the increasing militarization of Greek society. On Sunday, the government mobilized 5,000 police in Athens against around 10,000 demonstrators seeking to commemorate the victims of November 17. Fearing unrest, entire streets were

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blocked off by police, who arrested 99 people before the demonstration even started. In Patras police used tear gas and truncheons against mostly young demonstrators who approached premises of the fascist Golden Dawn party.

Already last week, police stormed the building of the state broadcaster ERT, which had been occupied by former employees to protest against layoffs.

All these measures have been agreed with the representatives of the "troika"—the European Central Bank (ECB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU Commission. Representatives of the troika returned to Athens two weeks ago to negotiate further cuts in social spending with the government.

Troika officials are demanding not only additional cuts of €2 to €3 billion in the 2014 budget, but are also calling for so-called structural reforms. Such "reforms" include lifting the ban on forcible house evictions and reducing the employer's share of social insurance. If these steps are not taken, the troika has threatened to stop the next tranche of aid credits of over a billion euros.

On Monday, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble once again rejected any debt relief for Greece. Instead he argued for the continuation of the loan program, which is bound up with fierce social attacks. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel has summoned Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras to Berlin on Friday to discuss these issues.

The austerity measures dictated by Berlin and the EU have already resulted in a record unemployment rate of over 27 percent in Greece. Average wages have fallen by 40 percent since 2008. Such social attacks are incompatible with democratic rights. Just as Greece was the EU's testing ground for the dismantling of social rights, now authoritarian forms of rule are to be enforced which are to serve as a model for the entire continent.

The EU is the main driving force behind this development, relying not only on the support of the government, but also on the country's largest opposition party. As popular resistance increases, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) seeks to serve as a factor for stability. Its brief press release accuses the government of adding "fuel to the fire" and provoking unnecessary protests at the universities. The layoffs should be withdrawn, the party requests.

But such calls are merely lip service. SYRIZA vehemently defends the European Union; in an interview with the channel ET3 last Friday, party leader Alexis Tsipras expressly opposed "unilateral action" to reduce the debt burden, i.e. a unilateral refusal by Greece to pay off its debt. A solution had to be found within the euro zone, Tsipras declared.

The character of SYRIZA is also demonstrated by the discussions between the party and the right-wing Independent Greeks (ANEL) on possible electoral alliances. ANEL is calling for the establishment of a technocratic government equipped with emergency powers aimed at organizing a "national awakening and uprising."

In his ET3 interview, Tsipras did not rule out joint lists with the ANEL in local elections due in May next year. There have already been a number of such alliances struck between the two parties.

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