

Greek riot police attack protesters

John Vassilopoulos
21 November 2014

Tens of thousands gathered in Athens and in cities throughout Greece on Monday to commemorate the anniversary of the student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic in 1973. The uprising was brutally crushed on November 17, 1973, by the military junta ruling Greece 41 years ago.

On the evening of November 12, Athens University authorities decided to close down premises ahead of the anniversary, whose marking traditionally takes place over three days starting on November 15. To enforce the lockout, riot police were dispatched to guard premises and prevent students from entering them.

The following evening (November 13), riot police attacked a group of 1,500 protesters that had gathered outside the Athens Polytechnic building to protest the police presence at the university.

According to a report in *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton* (*Ef.Syn.*), the attack was completely unprovoked with riot police shouting “fuck them up” as they beat protesters continuously for a quarter of an hour. Underscoring the savagery of the attack, an *Ef.Syn* reporter covering the events wrote: “Having covered events of this sort for 30 years, this is the first time I have witnessed the violent break-up of a peaceful demonstration being converted into such a blatant ‘party’. Usually riot police carry out beatings silently or at most uttering some incoherent ‘war’ cries. After the mass vote by police [for the fascist Golden Dawn party in 2012], it seems that the time has come for us to see these battle units celebrating their own anniversary of 1973.”

On November 17, Athens was placed in virtual lockdown with policing “more prevalent than previous years”, according to the *Ethnos* newspaper, “with groups of 5 to 10 uniformed police every 100 to 200 meters in the roads around the Polytechnic and the city centre, plus patrolling groups of two officers.” According to different reports, the police presence in

the centre of Athens was 7,000 strong.

The heavy police presence made for a tense atmosphere with a number of incidents taking place during the march. According to *Ef.Syn*, protesters near the Hilton Hotel were victims of an unprovoked attack by riot police who used tear gas and stun grenades. During the march, a photojournalist for the Greek edition of *vice.com* was also attacked, with riot police reportedly pulling her by the hair.

Tensions reached a high point later on Monday evening in the Exarcheia district of Athens, with skirmishes taking place between police and protesters until the early hours of the morning. Police reportedly assaulted another *vice.com* reporter, Antonis Ntinakos, who was in Exarcheia covering the events.

A video uploaded to YouTube on Tuesday, depicts police on motorbikes driving menacingly through Exarcheia, beeping their horns. It also shows a violent assault on a kiosk attendant by riot police. Police officers acted as a law unto themselves, roughing him up after he accused them of stealing bottles of water. The kiosk attendant is heard shouting in the video: “What are you doing? Are you in your right mind? You’re going to steal the bottles of water?” At least two of the riot squad are seen hitting the attendant with truncheons and then threatening another two people at the kiosk.

Appearing on Antenna TV on Wednesday morning, vice-president of the Athens Police Employee Association, Stavros Balaskas, defended the behaviour of the police by attempting to shift the blame onto the kiosk attendant. He claimed that police had offered to pay the attendant for the water but that he refused to take it. Balaskas said “my colleagues did not understand that they had to leave [the kiosk] and insisted on giving him the money in order to take the bottles of water.” Balaskas provocatively added that police had sought the kiosk attendant’s arrest, given

that “it is illegal to refuse to make a sale.”

Also present on the panel was the ruling New Democracy’s Parliamentary Representative and former Health Minister Adonis Georgiadis who was equally provocative, accusing the kiosk attendant of “trying to act the tough guy towards the police”.

The ferocity of the riot police on Monday follows close on the heels of a series of militant high school occupations throughout Greece. The violence can only be understood in the context of the government’s wider effort to prevent the anniversary of the uprising from becoming a focal point for anger against the austerity measures, passed by successive governments, with no public mandate, at the behest of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund—collectively known as the troika.

The ability of the police to act with such impunity against protesters and journalists is an expression of the increasing authoritarianism of successive Greek governments.

George Papandreou’s social democratic PASOK administration initiated the first wave of austerity after coming to power in 2009. In August 2011, PASOK abolished the University Asylum Law. The law, passed originally in the early 1980s in response to the murder of students who took part in the November 1973 uprising, barred police and security forces from Greek campuses. It required police to seek the permission of a prosecutor before being able to enter the grounds of higher education establishments. Students were guaranteed sanctuary from arrest or state brutality.

The repeal of the law was first used by the unelected government of top banker Loukas Papademos, who replaced Papandreou, in the 2011 anniversary of the Polytechnic uprising when police entered a public university in Thessaloniki, for the first time since 1982. Authorities, with the help of riot police, were then allowed to pre-emptively lock out students on November 12. The following evening, police proceeded to attack students protesting outside the Polytechnic.

Chief responsibility for the state repression against students lies with the trade unions and their pseudo-left backers. Through a series of limited 24-hour strikes, they have been instrumental in winding down opposition to wave after wave of savage austerity measures imposed since 2010. Any militant strikes directly threatening government policy have been

wound down and isolated, even as the government employed dictatorial civil mobilisation orders to break them.

SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) spokesman Panos Skourletis stated Wednesday that Monday night’s events in Exarcheia “consolidates the belief that there are far-right enclaves within riot police units”. The media interpreted Skourletis’ comments as an implicit reiteration of his party’s plan to abolish the riot police once in government. This refers to a policy statement released by SYRIZA in September regarding police reform.

Calling for the abolition of the riot police and “banning the use of special forces to repress popular mobilisations”, SYRIZA proposes that they instead be transferred into Greece’s regular police stations, while at the same time “creat[ing] special services to tackle crises (natural disasters, extreme criminality and violence)”.

In other words, the units of the Greek police most associated with the violent suppression of the population and who have proven links to Golden Dawn, are to be integrated into the regular police.

SYRIZA’s purposefully vague references to “extreme criminality and violence” could easily include civil unrest outside the controlled framework of “popular mobilisations”. This term refers to the series of toothless strikes and rallies called by the trade union bureaucracy in the last five years, in order for workers to let off steam while ever-worse austerity measures were passed through parliament.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact