

Syriza dispatches police to clear protesters from Athens university

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On Friday morning, Greek Interior Ministry police units were deployed to the Technical University of Athens to remove protesters occupying the administration building. With this action, the Syriza-led government signalled its readiness to use state repression against opponents of its austerity measures.

At about 6 a.m., police attempted to break down the main door to the building. When this failed, they climbed a ladder and entered through a second-floor window. They arrested 14 protesters, who offered no resistance. Others had gathered at the front of the building to protest the police action.

The protesters, members of an anarchist group, had occupied the building for 19 days to show support for a hunger strike being carried out by their imprisoned comrades and demand that the government abolish maximum security prisons and repeal anti-terror laws.

While the past several days had seen clashes between protesters and police on the periphery of the occupation, the action itself, carried out by a handful of people, was merely symbolic. Since 2008, there have been far larger and more protracted occupations of universities throughout the country, none of which ended with the mobilization of police to attack and dislodge the demonstrators.

The crackdown by Syriza has great political significance. Police operations at Greek universities have a definite history. In 1973, the final year of the colonels' junta, the military leaders carried out a bloody massacre on the campus of the University of Athens.

Students and workers across the country had gathered to protest against the dictatorship. Soldiers loyal to the junta stormed the University of Athens on November 17 and savagely attacked the demonstrators, killing at least two dozen.

Following the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, police and soldiers were legally barred from entering university campuses until the relevant law was overturned in 2011 by the government, at that time led by the social democratic PASOK. The repeal of the law was in response to mass protests against government austerity measures that had broken out across the country.

At that time, Syriza loudly protested the repeal of the law. But after less than three months in power, it has used a protest by a handful of anarchists to send a message both to the Greek population and to Western banks and governments that it will not hesitate to use police violence to suppress social opposition to the continuing destruction of living standards.

The decision to deploy the police was taken at the highest level. The deputy minister for citizens' protection, Giannis Panousis, said Thursday that Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, had given him a green light to send police to evict the protesters.

Last week, Panousis demanded a crackdown on protests and was supported by Tsipras, who declared that his government would ensure "law and order."

Already on February 20, the Syriza-led government reneged on its election promises and accepted a continuation of the debt-repayment scheme dictated by the "troika" (the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank), including the demand for further cuts in social spending, anti-working class labour market "reforms," and expanded privatizations.

On Thursday, the troika institutions ratcheted up the pressure on Athens to quickly agree to more severe cuts. At a press conference in Washington following a meeting between IMF head Christine Lagarde and Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, Lagarde

made it clear that Greece would not be granted an extension on the payment of interest on IMF loans.

“We have never had an advanced economy asking for payment delays,” she said, insisting that Greece pay the IMF more than €2 billion in May and June or face bankruptcy.

A spokesperson for the European Commission warned the Greek government, “We are at this time not satisfied with the progress already made. The work must be intensified.”

German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble was even more explicit. “In Europe, we have good reasons not to provide any financial assistance without proper consideration,” he told a gathering at the Brookings Institution in Washington. In the ensuing discussion, he reiterated that he saw no risks to the global economy should Greece exit the euro zone. The decision lay with Greece, he said.

On Monday, a list of cuts is to be submitted by Athens, to be reviewed at a meeting of eurogroup finance ministers to be held in Riga at the end of the week.

The Greek government has responded to the threats by reiterating its willingness to compromise and impose cuts. In a statement to the Reuters news agency, Tsipras said he was confident there would be an agreement with the troika institutions by the time of the Riga meeting.

Varoufakis used his trip to Washington to solicit support for the Greek government and reiterate its servility to finance capital. He also spoke at the Brookings Institution event, but made no mention of Schäuble’s threats.

Instead, he reaffirmed his government’s intention to impose further cuts. “I do not think the gap between what our partners want and what the Greek government is implementing is so great,” he said.

Specifically, he agreed to a series of privatizations of state enterprises. “The privatizations of recent years have been a disaster,” Varoufakis declared, promising that Syriza would change that.

“We are not against privatization, we are against a sellout,” he said, calling for certain standards for labour rights and environmental protection.

Greece had great interest in reaching a rapid agreement with donors, he continued, adding, “We are absolutely prepared for compromise.”

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