

On the spot report from Athens

Mass demonstration opposes austerity in Greece

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Ahead of Sunday's referendum a massive protest took place in Athens Friday evening in opposition to the austerity programme of the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund.

In a show of defiance, tens of thousands of people packed Athens' central Syntagma Square in front of the parliament building. The main sentiment expressed by the crowd was a determination to end years of austerity. Among them were many young people.

Some protesters carried homemade banners reading "Oxi!" ("No!"), along with other statements denouncing austerity. Among these were a number referring to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, including, "Merkel shut up, now the people are speaking," "The time has come to change the country," and "Frau Merkel raus" (Mrs. Merkel out).

Even from the elevated vantage point above the steps leading to the parliament, one was unable to see, in all directions, where the demonstration ended. From 7pm, the crowd began to swell and by 10pm many were still streaming into Syntagma from its adjacent Metro station. Reuters reported that at least 50,000 joined the demonstration, but even this underestimated the numbers in attendance.

As the square reached capacity, many in the audience sang and clapped along with songs associated with opposition to the Greek military junta that ruled the country with an iron fist from 1967 to 1974. One of these, *The Bells Will Ring*, by famed composer Mikis Theodorakis, was sung by the pianist and singer Iro.

While the demonstration was called by Syriza, with many of the attendees expressing illusions in the party, it represented a massive repudiation of the Syriza-led government's perspective of seeking to negotiate a

settlement with the European Union (EU), European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to impose only slightly less onerous cuts on a somewhat extended timetable.

WSWS reporters spoke to scores of people throughout the day and at the protest who said they were participating to demand an end to years of austerity that have resulted in a collapse of living standards and unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty.

"I want to find a job. I want something different for our country. I don't want to go to work in the Netherlands, Germany or England. I want to stay here and fight the situation," 18-year-old Georgis said. "I am going to vote 'no.' We don't know what will happen on Monday, but I want to see something different from this government."

He hoped that Syriza would stop the austerity but was not sure that would happen. "I voted for Tsipras to be our prime minister and I want to see something different. It is a great risk that our country has to take, but it is the only solution."

Asked what he thought of Tsipras's stated aim of concluding a deal with the EU even after a "no" vote in the referendum, he said: "If people vote 'no' on Sunday and then Tsipras does this, he doesn't respect us. He asked us to vote 'yes' or 'no.' If we vote 'no' and he makes a deal with Germany and the EU, I don't think he respects us. If the prime minister doesn't respect his people, I don't want him to be my prime minister."

Anastacia also joined the demonstration to protest the social devastation caused by the EU's austerity dictates. She said, "We are poor. I don't have a job. I

have two degrees and no job. That is the reason why I am here.”

Asked about Syriza’s plan to propose new austerity measures, she said she still trusted the government, but added, “It is our responsibility to stop it. We are here to say ‘no’ and to stop this politics. I don’t care what the government will do. This is my time, it is my responsibility.”

Anna-Maria was participating in the demonstration, she said, because austerity cuts led to people “having one third of the money they had, not being able to pay their bills or to buy their medicine.” She saw the referendum as an expression of democracy: “It is not like in an election, where you are voting for a party hoping that they will do what they promised.”

She told the WSWS that she saw the fight against austerity as an international question. “The austerity policies in Greece are like a chain effect. It goes everywhere. That is what we don’t want. We don’t want people in Europe suffering for these decisions that the very rich one percent are making for us. We are all part of a chain. The earth is made of people and not made of money and not made of hedge funds.”

The mood contrasted sharply with the vacillation and cowardice of the Syriza government and its prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, who addressed the Syntagma crowd later in the evening. Tsipras called the referendum last Sunday as a maneuver to prepare a further capitulation to the EU’s demands, no matter the result of the vote.

Syriza had declared the event to be a “‘festival of the people.” In his speech, Tsipras was at pains to stress, “Today we are not protesting, today we are celebrating democracy, today we are celebrating the victory of democracy, whatever the result is on Monday.”

Tsipras made a series of paeans to a vague “democratic” Europe in which he sought to sow illusions. He continued, “On Sunday, we’re not simply deciding to stay in Europe, we’re deciding to live with dignity in Europe... to be an equal among equals in Europe.”

Tsipras hailed the main powers of the European Union, even as they continued to work feverishly to engineer the collapse of the Syriza government and regime-change in Greece.

His speech gave succour to the most right-wing forces, who are preparing a massive offensive to crush

the opposition of workers and youth. As Tsipras completed his speech, he was enthusiastically embraced by his coalition partner Pannos Kammenos of the right-wing Independent Greeks, who had earlier in the day declared that only the army guaranteed “stability internally.”

While Syriza is seeking to cement its ties with right-wing elements, the military and the EU, these forces are doing everything they can to bring down the democratically elected government in order to impose far harsher attacks on the working class.

Just hours before the demonstration, 65 retired generals signed a statement endorsing the “yes” campaign and its demands for the continuation of savage austerity measures. The military’s backing of the “yes” camp followed the support already given by the head of the Greek Orthodox Church and the main trade union federation in Greece, the GSEE.

This campaign has been facilitated by a relentless outpouring of propaganda from Greece’s media outlets, which are predominantly owned by right-wing oligarchs.

But despite this campaign, backed by the pro-austerity parties New Democracy and PASOK, the “yes” camp protest held in Athens’ Kallimarmaron Stadium on Friday was significantly smaller than the “no” protest.



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