

Syriza government sends Greek riot police to attack refugee camp

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On the instructions of the Syriza government, Greek riot police forcibly removed 2,300 migrants from the camp they had set up in the village of Idomeni on the Greek-Macedonian border. The squad of 350 police stormed the camp on December 9.

The migrants had been occupying the area around the railway line in the neutral zone between the two countries for 25 days, protesting the decision of the Macedonian authorities to refuse them entry.

Since November, Macedonia has only allowed people fleeing from the conflict zones in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to cross its border, resulting in around 10 percent of the total number of migrants being stranded in Idomeni. A large number are from Pakistan, Iran and Morocco.

The decision, pitting refugees and migrants from different countries against each other, increased tensions at the border, with clashes breaking out between police and different groups of migrants. On December 2, Greek riot police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at a group of migrants trying to cross the border.

The following day a group of stranded migrants set up a barricade made up of empty barrels and pieces of wood to prevent Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans from crossing the border. This led to scuffles between various groups of migrants and refugees. The worsening crisis was used to justify the deployment of Greek riot police.

Amid the chaos, a 22-year-old Moroccan man died after being electrocuted trying to cross the border on top of a train stuck at the border. “The young man touched high voltage cables at the spot where OSE trains have been immobilised for days,” said Antonis Rigas, an official with Doctors Without Borders.

Dimitris Tsoukalas, Deputy General Secretary at the Ministry of Interior in the Syriza government and a

former leader of the pro-austerity PASOK party, described the tragedy in grotesque terms. “Things are not easy. ... On the other side they’ve put up electrified cables ... and a guy was burnt. We had a roasted Moroccan.”

Such callous comments would normally be associated with members of the fascist Golden Dawn or Syriza’s coalition partners, the xenophobic Independent Greeks.

Prior to the raid, Greek police moved all journalists, photographers and aid workers to an area three kilometres from the railway line and the camp. A statement justified this extraordinary move on safety grounds, against “possible provocations and tensions or threatening and hostile behaviour.”

Speaking to Sto Kokkino, a radio station owned by Syriza, journalist Kostas Kantouris recounted how he and two photographers were briefly detained at the local police station after being stopped 300 meters from the camp. Asked whether he thought the measures were taken to prevent the coverage of the operation, Kantouris said, “Of course! We’ve been completely gagged.”

According to the police, the operation took place “without any disorderly incidents or especially violent behaviour.” This was echoed by Syriza’s Deputy Minister for Immigration Policy Yiannis Mouzalas, who stated, “The police’s intervention took place with dignity, respect for human rights and with minimal, if no, use of violence.”

Given the record of state brutality against migrants in Greece, as well as the widespread support for Golden Dawn among riot police, such statements cannot be taken at face value—not least since the operation took place under a media blackout. According to a report on France2, the first to be allowed back into the camp were doctors and nurses with Doctors Without Borders,

while journalists were reportedly asked by police to delete photos from their cameras.

At least one instance of police brutality was recorded by *Telegraph* and VICE journalist Oscar Webb. He posted a picture on his twitter feed of an Iranian man being treated by a paramedic. According to Webb, the man was “batoned by Greek police after he refused to leave his tent.”

The attack on the migrants followed the European Union’s threat to expel Greece from the Schengen area of passport-free travel. It is part of the wider clampdown on migrants, underscored by the recent calls from European Council President Donald Tusk for the long-term internment of refugees and for sealing off Europe’s borders.

Anxious to reassure the EU that the pseudo-left Syriza government is in alignment with these reactionary anti-refugee and migrant policies, Immigration Policy Minister Yiannis Mouzalas warned that migrants now have 30 days to either lodge an asylum claim or leave voluntarily, otherwise, “they will have to be compulsorily repatriated to their countries.”

Praising the actions of the police, the pro-business daily *Kathimerini* highlighted the commercial considerations behind the operation. An article headlined “Riot Police liberated the train lines in Idomeni” stated, “The country’s prestige has been damaged irreparably after the lengthy closing of its borders ... while losses suffered by [railway operator] TRAINOSE currently exceed €1.5 million, after customers changed their travel routes. The biggest damage is to TRAINOSE’s credibility after it worked so hard to secure contracts with technological giants such as HP and Sony, the fate of which remain uncertain.” According to the article, the border closure prompted HP to use a Slovenian port instead of the Greek port of Piraeus in order to transport its goods to Central Europe.

After being forced to leave the camp at Idomeni, all migrants were transported to former Olympic stadiums in Athens, which have been converted into refugee shelters. The biggest of these is at the former Taekwondo stadium, which has a capacity of 1,700 people but is currently overflowing with over 2,000 people. The conditions are so bad that many are desperate to leave the facility. Speaking to Deutsche Welle, Payman Qasimian, an Iranian asylum seeker,

said, “I would rather sleep outside ... it smells so bad in there and it’s so cold that people are sleeping in air ducts and shower rooms just because they are a little bit warmer.”

Mahdi, a 20-year-old Moroccan, told Al Jazeera “The stadium isn’t even fit for animals” and people are sleeping on concrete floors with no mattresses. He added, “[T]here are no showers and the bathrooms are filthy,” while, “At night, people cannot sleep because everyone is stepping on one another to move around.”

On Sunday, a sit-down demonstration was staged by migrants protesting against the conditions.

Scuffles broke out between migrants at the weekend. This led to 120 Moroccans being moved to the notorious Corinth detention centre, 83 kilometres west of Athens. The Corinth site has a record of brutality against inmates and was the scene of a riot in April 2013.

Mouzalas said that the Taekwondo facility was only a temporary measure and that those at the stadium would be moved by December 17. Asked where they would go, he replied, “I don’t know where the migrants will go, you will find out in due course.”

Such comments underscore the complete lack of social infrastructure in Greece following five years of austerity dictated by the EU and International Monetary Fund, with NGOs and charities increasingly called upon to fill the vacuum.

Syriza’s unleashing of the riot police against the migrants amid a media blackout must serve as a warning to the Greek working class. A year ago, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras pledged to disband the riot police after coming to power. Following his election in January, he immediately reneged on the promise. Having betrayed its mandate to end austerity and signed the most severe austerity memorandum yet with the EU in the summer, Syriza relies on repressive measures to force through brutal cuts in living standards.



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