

Syriza government assaults Greek retirees

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On Monday, the Greek government headed by the pseudo-left party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) mobilised police to brutally attack a small group of retirees who marched through Athens city center to request a meeting with Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Police blocked the street to the parliament building with police cars and forcibly dispersed the demonstration.

When angry pensioners tried to break through the blockade and overturn a police car, units of riot police tossed tear gas into the crowd at close range. Elderly men and women, some with crutches, had to retreat, gasping for breath. Despite the attacks, the retirees held a small rally. A large poster read “Struggle to survive - restoration of pensions - free public health care.”

Around 25,000 Greek pensioners are affected by the new drastic cuts introduced by the Syriza government. In recent months, the government has already implemented pension cuts, which had been agreed as part of the last austerity package. From Tuesday onwards, additional professions, including media technicians, sailors, lawyers, notaries and gas station owners, are being forced to accept a reduction in their supplementary pensions of up to 40 percent. In Greece, thousands of people are dependent on supplementary pensions.

The reckless and brutal attack on defenseless pensioners once again exposes the reactionary nature of the pseudo-left Syriza government. The development confirms the warning made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that police violence against refugees, which reached a new peak this year, was in fact directed against the entire working class.

The Athens police is under the command of Syriza MP and Minister for Public Safety Nikos Toskas, an army general, who as a member of the social democratic PASOK already headed the office of the Deputy Minister of Defence between 2009 and 2011, and worked as Secretary of State in the Department of Defense in the first Syriza government, from January to September 2015.

The government is apparently concerned that the tear gas attack could fuel further protests. According to media reports, Tsipras has instructed Toskas to immediately

prohibit any further use of tear gas against demonstrating workers and pensioners and assume political responsibility for the incident. The criticism of the police, both in the ranks of Syriza and the opposition, is utterly cynical. The use of such gas against the pensioners was not an oversight, but rather revealed the true function of the police as an instrument of the bourgeois state. In reality, the ruling class needs an aggressive police force to defend its property and enforce the austerity measures against workers.

Last week, the Greek Parliament officially approved the establishment of a new privatization fund, which envisages the sale of state run gas and water works. On September 27, 152 MPs from the ruling parties Syriza and Anel (Independent Greeks)—i.e., all but one, who was absent due to illness—voted for the package, while 141 members of the opposition voted against. International creditors had demanded that the privatization plans be adopted before releasing the next financial tranche to the country of 2.8 billion euros. In Athens, there were demonstrations against the privatization, and employees of the water works in Thessaloniki and Athens went on strike on the day of the vote.

The current austerity measures are part of the third memorandum, agreed by the Syriza government in 2015 with the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (the so-called Troika). In mid-October, representatives of the Troika went once again to Athens to check on the “progress” of the country’s austerity measures.

On Monday, the Greek government presented in Parliament its budget for 2017, which provides for a growth target of 2.7 percent and a primary surplus of 1.8 percent. These targets are to be reached through massive cuts and tax increases totalling around one billion euros in 2017 (together with the measures agreed in 2016 making a grand total of about 3-4 billion euros). On October 15, new price increases (on heating oil and excise tax on electricity) come into force. In 2017, an increase in the price of petrol is planned together with the introduction of

a special fee for telephones, as well as special taxes on items such as cigarettes and coffee.

The country's national debt is expected to increase in absolute terms to 318.6 billion euros, with the ratio of debt to GDP falling slightly from 178.9 to 174.8 per cent. The government claims that it needs to make major savings to fund limited social spending. The "Social solidarity income" (KEA), which so far exists only in some municipalities, is to be extended from January 2017 to all of Greece—affecting about 700,000 persons.

The KEA is a pittance in light of the social plight of thousands of Greek families and, like the Hartz IV laws in Germany, is aimed at increasing labor flexibility. A family of two adults and two children will be entitled to 400 euros a month, which will be calculated in line with parental income. Unemployed single parents with one child will receive 300 euros. Any person receiving more than 100 euros social grant in addition to their income, will receive just half the money in cash and the other half in the form of a social ticket, which can be used in shops. Those under 65 must participate in work schemes.

The EU is pushing for the rapid implementation of further brutal austerity measures in Greece. In a discussion on Greek economic policy in the European Parliament on Tuesday the EU's Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Pierre Moscovici called on the Greek government to fulfill all the demands of the EU institutions by the following Monday.

Creditors are insisting on a reform of the labor market. Since April of this year, an independent "group of experts to review Greek labor market institutions" has been reviewing a number of proposals relating to the minimum wage as well as the legal regulation of strikes and contract bargaining. On September 27, the "experts", including two German professors, published their recommendations and are negotiating with the Greek Minister of Labour, Greek unions and employers' associations.

Six years of austerity have led to an unprecedented social decline in Greece. This finds one expression in a significant decline in the population. Recent figures from the Greek statistics authority ELSTAT show that the gap between birth and death rates from 2011 to 2015 continues to rise. The country's population has decreased by about 90,000 people. That corresponds to the population of a major Greek city. During the year 2011, 4,671 more deaths were registered than births. By 2015, 29,365 more people died than were born. The data for 2016 indicates a further reduction in the population.

This development is a direct result of austerity. Young

people have no financial security to start a family, while elderly people die prematurely from the lack of health care. The country's suicide rate has risen dramatically during the crisis.

As the social divide increases, so too does the harassment by the authorities of the most oppressed layers of the working class. One particularly shocking case of class justice took place in the city of Larissa on September. A 51-year-old woman was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a fine of 150,000 euros for alleged fraud and misappropriation of state funds. Twenty years ago, she had forged her school records in order to apply for a job as a cleaner in public nursery schools.

The case against this woman, which is now before the Court of Appeal, throws a spotlight on the social situation in Greece under a supposedly leftist government. Not one of the bankers, businessmen or politicians who enriched themselves in recent years with criminal activities in the state apparatus or in the financial markets, and who caused the country's economic crisis has been prosecuted, let alone sent to prison.

These class tensions find expression in a widespread rejection of all bourgeois parties, in particular Syriza. A survey by Public Issue published on Sunday in the Syriza-affiliated newspaper *Avgi*, estimates that 90 percent of respondents are dissatisfied with the government and 80 percent dissatisfied with the opposition. A recent election forecast, drawn up by the University of Macedonia, gives Syriza just 16 percent of the vote with the conservative New Democracy (ND) polling at 28.5 percent.



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