

Right wing whips up anti-refugee sentiment in Greek island protests

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Thousands protested last week against the refugee detention centres located across the Greek islands of the Northern Aegean bordering Turkey, and the plans to develop new ones.

There are reportedly more than 50,000 refugees currently interned on Greece's islands in so-called hot-spot camps as part of the dirty deal cut in 2016 between the European Union, Turkey and the 2015-2019 pseudo-left Syriza-led government. The deal stipulates that all refugees crossing into Greece from Turkey will be interned until their cases are processed, before deportation back to Turkey.

The protests were organised by local authorities and business groups, with small businesses and public services shutting and bringing much of the local economy to a standstill. Shops, pharmacies and petrol stations closed, as well as some clinics. Taxi and bus drivers also joined the strike.

The biggest protest took place in Mytilini, the capital of Lesbos, with around 7,000 people gathering at the town's port. A sizeable contingent was from the small village of Moria, which is site to the notorious camp of the same name. Protesters demanded the closure of the site, carrying banners reading, "No more prisons for human souls in the North Aegean."

Dubbed by the BBC as the "worst refugee camp on Earth," Moria has conditions that have been condemned by aid groups and are described by inmates as "hell on earth." Nearly 20,000 refugees live in and around the site of the camp, which has a capacity of less than 3,000 people.

Protests of several thousand also took place on the islands of Chios and Samos, both of which are home to overcrowded internment camps (Samos has 7,200 migrants herded into a camp built for just 700). Speaking to the BBC, one Samos islander said, "Here it's like a prison. The migrants aren't allowed to leave the island.

They aren't free to go where they like."

Additional pressure on the already overcrowded camps has come from the increased flow of refugees across the sea during the previous year. Figures released by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in January show that nearly 60,000 people made the sea journey from Turkey into Greece last year, up by 84 percent compared to 2018. Nearly 1,500 people made the crossing in the first two weeks of January, with 60 percent landing on Lesbos.

Extreme overcrowding has placed inmates under extreme psychological pressure. Many are already traumatised as victims and witnesses of atrocities in their home countries. Speaking about Moria to *InfoMigrants*, an aid worker with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) explained, "The overcrowding of the camp, the cold and the waiting doesn't help the situation and makes it harder on everyone. We lack everything in Moria: food, showers, toilets... You have to line up for everything here, all the time."

This unbearable situation has resulted in an upsurge of violence, with two stabbing fatalities since the start of the year. Speaking to *InfoMigrants*, a recent arrival at the camp said, "Since I arrived in Moria, there's not a day that goes by without a fight breaking out... Every day, someone is injured."

Tensions have also spilled outside of the camp, partly due to the increase in petty crime fuelled by the poverty and desperation faced by refugees. Another source of tension is the health hazard posed by the lack of safe waste disposal from the camp. A written complaint sent by the Moria residents' association to the local authority last November read, "The sewage cannot be transmitted via the local settlement's waste disposal pipeline and as a result overflows into the stream that runs on the edge of the village's residential zone."

A similar problem has been reported at the Chios camp.

The protests' organisers made a conscious effort to channel the frustration over the crisis in a reactionary direction. This was underscored by the posters advertising the event, which portrayed refugees as invaders by displaying photos of them in dinghy boats crossing the Aegean with a slogan that read "We want our islands back... we want our life back!"

Headline speaker at the Lesbos protest was Costas Moutzouris, a former member of the ruling conservative New Democracy (ND) who ran for Northern Aegean Prefect as an independent. His politics are so close to ND's that when he won, party leader Mitsotakis claimed it as an ND victory. He is a supporter of ND's policy of closing the Moria camp and setting up closed detention centres as an alternative.

Last November, ND announced plans to construct new detention centres on mainland Greece by July 2020. The government has already sent 9,000 refugees from the Greek islands to the new centres, and this year will send another 11,000. While the centres have been promoted as more humane and cleaner, they are new jails that allow more control over the refugee population. They will be completely closed off and will operate like the closed detention centres in the United States. Hidden behind walls, detention guards will be allowed to carry out attacks on refugees with impunity.

Speaking ahead of the strike, after visiting Samos and Lesbos at the weekend, Migration and Asylum Minister Notis Mitarakis demanded more repression of refugees and migrants: "First, more efficient guarding of our borders and, second, the immediate return of those who don't deserve international protection."

Moutzouris' speech was laden with far-right nostrums. He laid the blame for social problems such as lack of access to healthcare, pressures on the education system and an inadequate transport system—the product of chronic underfunding exacerbated by the brutal austerity measures imposed by the European Union—on refugees. "They are forcefully trying to impose a different way of life and religion on us," he exclaimed. "We will not accept this."

Moutzouris put forward the fascistic claim that the overcrowded camps on the islands are part of a plan to change the demographics of Europe, explicitly implicating billionaire international financier George Soros—a common anti-Semitic dog-whistle. He railed against the sentiment of solidarity shown by the islands' residents towards the refugees contributing to the problem, exclaiming, "We tolerated this situation for a number of years. The time has come to react."

A former dean of the Athens Polytechnic, Moutzouris stood trial alongside of Greek EEK (Workers Revolutionary Party) general secretary Savas Michael as part of a lawsuit launched by Golden Dawn in 2013. His early run-in with the neo-fascist party has not stopped Moutzouris from forming close ties with the far right. Asked during his election campaign last summer for the post of prefect to comment on rumours that Golden Dawn supported his campaign, Moutzouris replied, "If there was, is or will be any support from Golden Dawn then this is welcome."

On Moutzouris' ticket during the elections stood Nikolaos Tallas, who has been active in local far-right circles, with links to those accused of carrying out the brutal repression of refugees in April 2018.

In the face of such overt overtures to the far right, pseudo-left groups sought to distance themselves from the official demonstrations on the islands and held separate ones. A small rally was held at Sapphos Square by the Lesbos Labour Centre, a local trade union federation affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece's trade union body, PAME, while local Syriza branches held their own demonstration.

However, it is Syriza along with their junior coalition partner, the xenophobic Independent Greeks, that presided over the creation of internment camps. The 2016 EU-Turkey deal, implemented by Syriza as a central component of the EU's Fortress Europe policy, was a frontal assault on the basic right to asylum and was deemed illegal by several human rights organizations as well as the United Nations.

Two months after the deal, the Syriza government employed tear gas and stun grenades against protesting refugees in Idomeni, a small village in Greece near the border with the Republic of North Macedonia, and ordered the clearing of the camp.



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