

Greek government passes draconian anti-protest legislation

John Vassilopoulos**13 July 2020**

Thousands marched through Athens and 40 other cities and towns last Thursday to protest a draconian Bill, severely restricting the right to protest and harking back to the repression imposed by the fascist junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974.

Many held banners reading “hands off demonstrations.” The march was peaceful until it reached the parliament in Syntagma Square, where the Bill was being debated. There riot police attacked protesters using stun grenades and tear gas. There were many incidents of police violence against demonstrators. A video released by online news site pressproject.gr, shows a group of motorcycle policemen driving into a small crowd of protesters.

The Bill was voted into law after a two-day debate by 187 MPs from the ruling conservative New Democracy party, the social-democratic Movement for Change (KINAL) and the far-right Greek Solution party.

Introducing the Bill, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said that with the new law “our aim is to have a framework that is operational”, stressing that currently, “50 people shut down Athens every day whenever they feel like it.”

This chimed with the barrage of media propaganda in the run up to the vote denouncing protests for harming commercial activity, especially in the aftermath of the easing of the coronavirus lockdown in May. In a statement released a week before the Bill was passed, the Athens Trade Association complained that “with 80 marches and gatherings in May when the market reopened and 53 from the start of June till now, with the centre of Athens closed on average 3 times per working day, all this creates stifling conditions on a daily basis which make the operation of the city and the market impossible.”

Under the new law protest organisers are required to

give advance notice of any planned public assembly “to the relevant local police or port authority.” The police or authorities are given the power to impose restrictions and even refuse permission for protests outright on public safety grounds, or if “there is a serious threat to disturb the socio-economic life of a particular area.” Spontaneous protests are effectively outlawed, as “unauthorised” protests and those which do not abide by prescribed restrictions can be put down.

Organisers are required to actively collaborate with the authorities to police a demonstration by “co-operating with the police or port authority liaison and abiding with their recommendations.” They are also required to inform attendants “not to bring along items that can be used in acts of violence,” as well as “request the intervention of the relevant police or port authority to remove individuals who are carrying such items.” They must appoint “an adequate number of individuals who can assist in safeguarding the assembly.”

Anyone arrested for attempting to subvert the peaceful character of the demonstration will be punished by two years in prison, while protest organisers will be liable for any injuries, fatalities or damage caused to property by participants.

The law echoes a 1971 decree, “Concerning Public Gatherings”, brought into force by the military junta. This decree provided much of the pseudo-legal basis enabling the junta to bloodily crush the Athens Polytechnic student uprising in 1973.

The decree was never formally abolished following the fall of the junta in 1974 and until now has officially constituted the only legislation on the statute books concerning the policing of protests. It has been argued that in practice it has “laid dormant”, on the grounds that the right to protest is protected by Article 11 of the

1975 Constitution. However, Article 11 explicitly allows the banning of protests by the police on the same grounds as those cited in the new law. It was this which allowed Citizen Protection Minister Michalis Chryssochoidis to dismiss claims that the new law harks back to the junta era, stating that “the law is attempting to consolidate the constitutional right for a citizen to protest so that the right to assembly is fulfilled. All those who believe that the government will be led into far-right paths are mistaken.”

This is belied by the text of the new law, which explicitly makes references to the 1971 decree and a 1972 decree stating that they are both now superseded by Article 14 of the new legislation allowing ministers to issue decrees which “regulate more specific issues in the enforcement of the [law]”. The government therefore has the power to impose additional repressive measures as dictated by circumstances! The mention of the 1972 decree, which established geographical zones in Greek cities where protests were expressly forbidden, is a clear indication of the repressive forms that such decrees could take.

The aim of the legislation is to pre-empt a massive upsurge in the class struggle. In a recent report, the European Commission anticipates that Greece’s economy is set to contract by 9.7 percent in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while unemployment is set to rise to nearly 20 percent.

Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) leader and former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras said as much during the debate in parliament, when, after citing the approach of a deep recession, he asked the government whether the new law was being passed “out of fear of the developments and possible social backlash, which are coming in the autumn.”

Syriza should know. This was the rotten party, hailed by the international pseudo-left, who in 2015 ditched its previous rhetoric about “opposing austerity” to carry out the most savage attacks yet imposed on workers in Greece. Over four years of his premiership, Tsipras had no qualms in employing the full force of the state against the “social backlash” prompted by his imposition of austerity measures at the behest of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

The Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) postures as opponents of the Bill, with General Secretary Dimitris Koutsoumpas responding to the

government, “You’re fooling yourselves if you think this monstrosity will be implemented. You will be forced to put it back in the draw even if it remains on the statute books. You will be forced by workers and the Greek people who will annul it in practice.”

Such bluster seeks to cover the KKE’s long history in betraying struggles in Greece. Through its trade union federation, the All Workers’ Militant Front (PAME), it poses as the militant wing of the trade union bureaucracy which has ensured that the countless general strikes over the last decade against austerity, including mass protests in Athens and all the main cities, never got out of the bureaucracy’s control, allowing the punishing measures to pass.

The legislation only formalises the role PAME plays in demonstrations. PAME’s bloc is always notoriously flanked with a security detail armed with bats who are there supposedly to safeguard the protest. Its real purpose was exposed when they supplemented the role of the police in October 2011 during a general strike, as they formed a wall in front of parliament and engaged in scuffles with protesters who tried to get near.

Citizen Protection Minister Chryssochoidis alluded to a specific aim of the new law in preventing demonstrations outside the control of pseudo-left groups in and around the trade union bureaucracy. Referring to PAME, he stated to a parliamentary committee in the run up to the vote, “Are there certain citizens who are something special? Who do not request permission [to protest]? Why does PAME request permission and they [unaligned groups] don’t? Why do we allow this? I don’t accept it.”

Chryssochoidis threw an olive branch to the KKE and PAME following the police attack on last week’s demonstrations, implying that he sees them as enforcers of the new legislation. Responding to complaints by KKE deputies in parliament, he admitted that its members and other demonstrators were tear gassed and described PAME’s conduct as “exemplary.”



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