

Greek government bans protests, imposes authoritarian measures utilising pretext of pandemic

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Greece's conservative New Democracy (ND) government is imposing dictatorial measures, using the COVID-19 pandemic as justification. Last week it mounted a huge police mobilisation in the run-up to the November 17 anniversary of the 1973 Athens Polytechnic student uprising against the military junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974.

Using the pandemic as a pretext, Chief of the Hellenic Police Michalis Karamalakis banned all public gatherings of four or more people between November 15 and November 18, which is the period during which commemoration events traditionally take place.

On November 17, the police deployed 5,000 officers in the capital. Despite the ban, protesters attended commemorations, only to be met with water cannons and tear gas, with the police utilising overhead drones to transmit live footage to police headquarters.

The claim that the right to assembly was banned on public health grounds does not hold water. Cases in Greece have been steadily rising since the summer following the government's decision to prematurely lift restrictions to kickstart the economy. With no significant resources allocated to counter the dire effects of this reopening, Greece's advantage of having had relatively few deaths in the first wave of the pandemic—the result of going into lockdown earlier than other European countries—has now been undone.

People are routinely crammed into public transport with only a mask as protection. The current death toll, as of November 24, stands at 1,815. This compares to 192 registered deaths on July 1, when the tourist sector was recklessly flung open for business. The health care system, decimated over the past decade by European Union-mandated austerity—carried out by social democratic, ND and SYRIZA governments alike—is already struggling to cope, with 85 percent of intensive care beds currently occupied.

In an interview with SKAI TV on the evening of November 17, Minister of Citizen Protection Michalis Chrysochoidis admitted that the ban had nothing to do with public health: “The city needs to operate like it's a normal day and we will continue in order to end this situation with protests that destroy social life.”

Following protests in parliament by some opposition parties, a number of small demonstrations in the centre of Athens—separately organised by Syriza, Diem25 and the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE)—were allowed to go ahead by Chrysochoidis. Later that day, however, riot police attacked a separate gathering of around 1,500 KKE members and supporters with tear gas and stun grenades. The group were planning to march through the centre of Athens. Among them were KKE members of parliament such as Thanos Pafilis, who was reportedly beaten as he tried to protect KKE General Secretary Dimitris Koutsoumbas from the police attack. Five people were arrested during the assault.

Koutsoumbas was prepared to come to terms with the police within the narrow, restrictive framework of the new anti-protest law. Explaining the events, he said, “The law states that a [police] negotiator engages with the person in charge of the demonstration. I was on my way at that time and they could have communicated with myself as KKE leader or the rest of the party's parliamentary group to ask us what our intentions were... So we could explain to you and of course let you know what we were planning to do.”

Chrysochoidis stated that he was “disappointed” with the KKE, adding of a party that is a safe known quantity to the ruling elite, “I have honoured the KKE since I was a small child.” On previous occasions he has described the KKE's conduct in demonstrations as “exemplary.” In this instance, after holding talks with the KKE's parliamentary group, Chrysochoidis ordered that the five arrested during the demonstration be released.

While the KKE found itself at the receiving end of the

increase in state repression last week, the ultimate target of the new authoritarian measures are Greek workers and youth who do not have the benefit of friends and allies within the government and state apparatus.

On its Facebook page, Menoume Energoi (We will stay active), a social activist group set up at outset of the pandemic, stated that since November 17 they have received tens of reports from people all over Greece who have received €300 on-the-spot fines by the police. According to the post: “in many cases fines were imposed arbitrarily because citizens were simply in the vicinity of organised gatherings. A friend of our page from Rhodes was fined €300 along with his girlfriend even though no demonstration had been called in the town. When they complained they were told that they were within a forbidden zone.”

Another group of 50 protesters were arrested in central Athens and kept for a long time next to one another without any regard for social distancing rules, before being taken into custody at central police headquarters.

A 17-year-old girl from the Saranta Ekklesies neighbourhood of Thessaloniki was taken into custody by plain clothes policemen on November 17 on her way back from a walk with a friend. According to *Parallaxi*, the Thessaloniki-based magazine that broke the story, Saranta Ekklesies has a large student population and as a result “resembled an impregnable fortress with tens of policemen and riot police vans being stationed on backstreets as well as main roads”. According to the report, while in custody the girl “was subjected to a body search and had to stay in her bra for a long time without ever being told where she was and what she’d done.”

Another incident involved an entire family living in the working class neighbourhood of Sepolia, located six km northwest of Athens city centre. According to reports, members of the notorious DIAS police motorcycle unit began an unprovoked attack against people who had attended a peaceful march to commemorate the 1973 uprising.

The march began at the Larissa Train Station, Athens’s railway terminal, and finished at Sepolia metro station. A video released on the Menoume Energoi group page documents one of these attacks, when a man, Orestis Katis, was arrested by a DIAS squad outside the block of flats where he lives after having attended the demonstration with his immediate family. In the video, police are seen handcuffing and roughing up Katis in front of his parents and his sister, whom police manhandled, along with others who were coming to his aid. Katis’s mother was reportedly injured and had to be hospitalised.

Katis’s sister, father and two family friends later went to the Kolonos police precinct where they were informed Katis

was being held, even though he was subsequently transferred to central police headquarters. They were all arrested after an altercation with police outside the precinct during which the father had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital in handcuffs and under police guard. A video of the incident was posted on the Menoume Energoi page.

Any event seen as a potential focal point for popular anger is regarded with alarm by the ruling elite. Referring to the upcoming anniversary of the murder of teenager Alexandros Grigoropoulos, whose murder by a policeman on December 6, 2008 sparked riots that lasted for nearly a month, Chysochoidis made clear that no protests will be allowed to take place this year.

The escalation of state repression must be seen in the context of increased militancy in the working class and among youth over the authorities’ criminal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just two months ago a nationwide wave of school occupations against the reckless opening of schools amid a huge spike in cases rocked the country.

At the end of October, Labour Minister Yiannis Vrotsis announced a new labour law bill based on a “flexible eight-hour workday,” which seeks to give employers the power to increase the working day from eight hours to 10 hours without paying overtime. Further obstacles to the right to strike are also proposed in the bill, including a requirement for the introduction of electronic voting by organisations calling a strike.

As anger mounts over the government’s disastrous COVID policies, in a country unable to cope with the pandemic due to the destruction of its health care and social services infrastructure, the ADEDY trade union has called a general strike in the public sector to be held Thursday. Among ADEDY’s demands are protective measures for employees and mass hirings in the health sector. Yet it is the Greek unions, as with the unions internationally, which are responsible for the horrendous situation their members face. They have collaborated with governments of all political stripes to herd workers into unsafe workplaces and keep open schools, universities and colleges, which have been critical vectors for the spread of the virus.



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