

Increasing police violence in Greece as coronavirus crisis escalates

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Amid the third wave of the pandemic, social and political tensions in Greece have an increasingly explosive character.

The government is opening up more of the economy despite the pandemic escalating and the seven-day incidence rate rising to over 150 per 100,000. On Monday, hairdressers, nail salons, massage parlours and archaeological sites were opened, soon to be followed by cafés, restaurants, and tourism. The Ministry of Education wants to open all schools as soon as possible.

At the same time, intensive care units are once again in a desperate situation. On Tuesday, 699 patients had to be ventilated—a record high. There is not a single intensive care bed left in Attica, the region around Athens. A total of 7,582 people have already died from the virus and the numbers will rise rapidly in the coming weeks. Pictures show ambulances queuing in front of Athens' largest hospital “Evangelismos” on Sunday evening. Over a hundred critically ill patients had to be intubated while still waiting for an intensive care bed.

New infections—3,586 on Tuesday—have never been as high as they are now, even in November when the winter wave overwhelmed the Greek health care system. Despite this, the government has cut spending on the health ministry, hired no new health workers, and has not taken over private clinics. It was not until this Monday that a few private doctors were signed up to work in the public hospitals.

In this toxic situation, a social storm is gathering that fills the ruling class with horror. The government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis of Nea Dimokratia (ND, New Democracy) has ordered indiscriminate police violence against any stirrings of resistance and is increasingly resorting to dictatorial means to intimidate and terrorise workers and youth.

Documented reports of beatings, torture and arbitrary police action that flooded social media this month prove once again that basic democratic rights in Greece are no longer worth the paper on which they are written. The EU member increasingly resembles a police state.

The events in the Athens neighbourhood of Nea Smyrni earlier this month were the starting point in the latest orgy of police violence. On Sunday March 7, young families were walking through their neighbourhood square, resting on a park bench, and watching their children play, when suddenly, helmeted riot police from the notorious DIAS motorbike unit

arrived.

The officers initially fined the parents, even though, according to the strict coronavirus regulations, they had previously sent the necessary text message with a code allowing them to go outside. Instead of enforcing real measures to control the pandemic, the large fines mostly amount to harassment and unjustified punishment.

When the people concerned in Nea Smyrni refused to accept the on-the-spot fines and were supported by passers-by, the policemen took out their batons and beat a young man without any reason. Reinforcements arrived immediately, witnesses reported 50 helmeted policemen filling the square. The man shouted, “I am in pain!” (*Ponao*), which was later echoed in the protests.

The shocking scene sparked anger and horror. The police and pro-government media immediately tried to falsify the events, claiming that a large group of men had attacked the police. Their lies did not last long in the face of the multitude of video evidence circulating on Twitter.

On Sunday evening, hundreds of residents demonstrated, and the police used tear gas and stun grenades. Two days later, on March 9, larger protests against police violence took place in Nea Smyrni, which ended in violent clashes. A young police officer was seriously injured, after which the police launched a savage revenge campaign against demonstrators and residents.

A video (at the 49-second mark) shows a gathering of police officers shouting, “Let’s go kill them!” and advancing into neighbourhoods on their motorbikes. The Star television station falsified the video excerpt afterwards so that the policemen’s call for murder could no longer be heard.

Police officers stormed homes and arrested protesters and complete bystanders, including seven minors who were held for three days at the Attica General Police Station (GADA). According to their classmates, two of the youths were not even present at the demonstration but were merely standing outside their school in Nea Smyrni.

A mobile phone video shows unrestrained police brutality against an 18-year-old woman named Efi, who rushed to the aid of another person pinned to the ground by police officers on motorbike. Efi was then beaten up herself, arrested and taken to GADA. There, according to her lawyer, she was sexually

harassed, threatened with rape several times and beaten up. When she asked for medical help, the police officers punched her in the face and replied, “You will spit a lot of blood today.”

The case of 21-year-old Aris Papazacharoudakis, exposed by the newspapers *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, *Dokumento* and *The Press Project*, bears all the hallmarks of the arbitrary actions of dictatorial regimes. In an interview, he tells how he was kidnapped in the middle of the street the day after the demonstration and then tortured and humiliated at the police station.

Hooded motorcyclists stopped the young anarchist and asked for his name. Then an unmarked car appeared, and Aris explained, “They threw me on the bonnet and handcuffed me. Then they threw a hood over my head and forced me into the car.” He was not given any details as to who they were or why they had taken him. At GADA, he was beaten up in the dark with a head covering on for hours and subjected to psychological torture. They also tried to extort names from other political activists.

After the allegations came to light, police officers sent a cease-and-desist letter to the newspapers. The editor of *Dokumento*, Kostas Vaxevanis, was even sued and presented with an arrest warrant for publishing the police letter.

The Mitsotakis government is accompanying the police-state campaign with lies, cover-ups and further attacks on democratic rights. In parliament, the day after the incident in Nea Smyrni, Mitsotakis attacked the youth who had shared photos, videos and comments against police violence on social media. The prime minister said social media was “bad for democracy” because it increased tensions and unrest. Young people there were in an echo chamber and could not develop “critical thinking.” Mitsotakis rightly fears that young people will break through the dominant ideology and propaganda of the establishment media and unearth the truth themselves.

In the same week as the Nea Smyrni events, the police also used violence against students in Thessaloniki, clearing the student occupation at Aristotle University in a brutal large-scale operation on March 11. Students had occupied the rector’s office for three weeks to protest against the government’s new authoritarian higher education law. Although it was known that the students wanted to end the occupation that day, at 6 a.m., masked plainclothes police stormed the building, which was surrounded by riot police with squad cars. More than 30 people were arrested.

Protests against police violence took place in Thessaloniki and Athens the evening after the eviction. Demonstrators also took to the streets in several districts in Athens the following weekend. Last Saturday in Athens, immigrants, refugees and their supporters also protested against the criminal concentration camps, police repression and racism against refugees, demanding asylum, shelter and papers.

The increasingly aggressive police operations are bolstered by the government’s smear campaign against the protests,

which it blames for the spread of the coronavirus. The ultra-right Development Minister Adonis Georgiadis (ND) claimed that the “left” was “blackmailing” the Greek population and using the “coronavirus as a weapon to destroy Greece.”

The government bears full responsibility for the catastrophic spread of the pandemic. It is protecting the profits of the financial oligarchy and destroying the health system. Georgiadis had already drastically cut the health budget as health minister in 2013-2014 and closed numerous hospitals. In a press conference at the time, he loudly boasted that he was pushing ahead with the dismissals of doctors without any pressure from the Troika (EU Commission, European Central Bank, IMF), “because it is the right thing to do.”

But the pseudo-left opposition party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) and its leader Alexis Tsipras, who now accuses the government of failure and authoritarianism, shares responsibility for the disastrous coronavirus situation and the massive police violence. From 2015 to 2019, Syriza imposed social austerity in the interests of the banks and corporations, and repeatedly quelled protests by workers, pensioners and youth using the police.

In the pandemic, Syriza has mostly supported the government’s steps to open up the economy and despite verbal sham battles, behaved as a loyal opposition. On March 18, in an interview on Open TV, Tsipras again advocated opening up the economy with “stricter” hygiene measures, such as a paltry two tests a week at schools and workplaces.

Syriza, while verbally supporting the protests against police violence, is fearful of the growing opposition among workers and youth. There was “a danger that also affects Syriza, I say this quite openly: that a large anti-political current is emerging,” Tsipras told Open TV. He was very concerned about a “distorted radicalisation of the young generation.”

What concerns Tsipras, Syriza and the entire ruling class is the spectre of socialist revolution. Workers and youth must draw the necessary conclusions from this. They need a clear political programme and their own independent leadership. The struggle against the pandemic—just like the struggle against social inequality and police violence—requires an international socialist strategy and the building of a Greek section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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