

Scale of forest fire devastation in Greece threatens to ignite social and political unrest

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Over 100,000 hectares of forest and farmland were razed to the ground in Greece between July 29 and August 12, according to the European Forest Fire Information System.

The EFFIS report lays bare the scale of destruction unleashed by forest fires ravaging parts of Greece since the start of the month. The figure accounts for 90 percent of all land destroyed by fire since the beginning of the year and dwarfs the average 2,750 hectares that were burnt over the same period each year between 2008 and 2020.

The brunt of destruction has been borne by the northern part of the island of Evia, off the north-east coast of Attica, which encompasses Athens. At least 50,000 hectares have burnt since the start of August, according to a survey of satellite images carried out by Copernicus, the European Union's Earth observation programme. The fire in Evia has been described as the biggest in modern Greek history.

The ferocity of the fires was fuelled by record high temperatures in Greece over the previous week as the country suffered its worst heatwave in 30 years with temperatures staying above 40 degrees celsius for extended periods.

In his address to the nation last week, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis sought to absolve his government of any responsibility for the disaster. Feigning sympathy with the thousands who have lost their homes and properties, he insisted that country was "facing a natural disaster of unprecedented dimensions" and firefighters were in a battle with "supernatural powers that often exceed their strength".

There is no doubt that climate change is the chief cause of the fires. But events have not taken place in a vacuum. Both climate change and the inability of essential services to respond to its deadly effects are the consequence of the anarchic capitalist mode of production, which considers the destruction of the environment as one of the costs of doing business.

It wasn't "supernatural powers" that hampered the response of firefighters but a decade of austerity which has decimated the fire service. Between 2020 and 2010 a total of €1.1 billion has been cut from forest protection and forest

fire service due to successive bailout packages signed by the Greek government at the behest of the European Union and International Monetary Fund. The trend has continued, after forest protection agencies were only awarded a paltry €1.7 million for the year despite having requested €17 million.

The results are devastating. Ranger Stations in Greece are woefully understaffed with many, such as that on Mount Parnitha near Athens where a fire broke out this month, without a single full-time forest ranger on site. The fire service is reportedly understaffed by 4,000 personnel, with an over-reliance on seasonal and volunteer fire-fighters while the average age of full-time firefighters is 45.

The lack of fire-fighters was denounced by residents on live television, many of whom were forced to evacuate or were left to battle the flames on their own. The deputy mayor of the village of Afidnes, 27 kilometres north of Athens, where a fire broke out in the first week of the month, angrily exclaimed on Open TV, "There has not been a single fire engine here for three hours. Three hours we've been pleading! The fire is out of control and we don't have the means to control it. The only people battling the fire are [volunteer fire fighter units]. They have sent us 1,000 police officers who are not doing anything! I want firefighters to save the village, whatever can be salvaged, because the fire has entered the village."

Another indication of chronic underfunding are outdated fire fighting vehicles, with only 15 percent being 10 years old or less. The most striking example are the 18 Canadair fire-fighter planes in Greece's fleet, most of which date back to 1979, with no new models purchased since 2000. Due to frequent breakdowns and repairs, a significant number of the planes are grounded at any one time. A former Canadair pilot told online news site *news247.gr*, "The Canadair planes can in theory fly from sunrise to sundown, but the ones we have in Greece are very old and don't have that capability. Think about the fact there was problems with them when I was flying them in the 90s and since then 30 years have passed."

Another issue limiting the effectiveness of the older

Canadair planes is the fact that their engines are not designed to operate in temperatures above 38 degrees, hampering their ability to fly during heatwave temperatures when the fires were raging.

With anger seething among Greek workers, the pseudo-left opposition party Syriza has stepped in to contain it. In a press conference this week Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras stated that the government bears “criminal responsibility” for the disaster, but refused to call for its removal, stating that he would not follow the “well-worn path” of calling for “resignations”. He called instead for unity and the establishment of a cross-party national plan to combat climate change, as well as the adoption of Syriza’s proposals to overhaul, modernise and better co-ordinate the country’s disaster response. Such posturing costs Tsipras nothing and is in stark contrast to its own record in government.

Junking its massive popular mandate to end austerity in the summer of 2015, after being swept into power at the start of that year, Tsipras’ government signed a third bailout package from the EU, IMF and European Central Bank which depended on making even deeper cuts to the country’s budget.

Moreover, Tsipras and his party, which has long presented itself as a fervent defender of the environment, bear their own “criminal responsibility” for the forest fire in the summer of 2018 at Mati, a small coastal town a few kilometres outside of Athens, in which over 100 lost their lives. Its only action was the convening of an independent enquiry into the disaster, whose findings were published at the start of 2019, a few months before elections that Tsipras knew he would lose.

Kicking the ball down the road by convening an inquiry will no doubt be a move followed by the current New Democracy government, with Mitsotakis vaguely stating that “any failures [in the government’s response] will be identified”. Even his commitment that all forest land burnt will be earmarked for re-forestation cannot be believed. Much of Greece’s forest land is not formally defined as such, which has resulted in their status being disputed over the years. On August 6, one day after Mitsotakis proclaimed his commitment to reforestation, the status of a forest which was burnt in 2012 near the town of Kastri on the island of Crete was revoked, overturning a pledge by the local authority to re-forest the area.

Seeking to deflect attention from the government, Attica Prefect Giorgos Patoulis, a member of the ruling New Democracy Party, was one of many local authority politicians who raised the possibility of an organised plan of arson. In addition, an editorial in the conservative *Estia*, Greece’s oldest daily, lent credence to conspiracy theories

that the Turkish Secret Service might be behind the fires.

The government has declared its commitment to make arson a felony offence, while Supreme Court Prosecutor Vassilis Pliotas has ordered an inquiry into the possibility of an organised arson attack.

This campaign has been accompanied by media reports of people arrested for suspected arson, many of whom were released due to lack of evidence. Many reports focused on the case of an Afghan refugee woman who attempted to burn trees in the grove around the *Pedion Tou Areos* park in the centre of Athens on August 6. The notion that she was part of some criminal conspiracy is refuted by her suffering from mental health problems. The fire was quickly extinguished and was a non-event, compared to the infernos that raged throughout the country.

The attempt of the government to blame arson for the fires should be taken as a warning. An editorial in *Estia* declared that the country had “entered uncharted waters which may result in social unrest”. The editorial revealed that some government officials had advised the prime minister to invoke Article 48 of the constitution which officially proclaims a “state of siege”, giving him the power to suspend parts of the constitution and rule by decree in what *Estia* termed a regime of “democratic dictatorship”.

While ND’s spokesman Tassos Gaitanis dismissed such claims as “farcical”, they are in line with the government’s drive towards authoritarianism as shown by the draconian anti-protest legislation passed by the government last year .

A recent report by Amnesty International documented increased police brutality in the wake of the new legislation and under the guise of a second lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. According to the report, “In November and December 2020, the Greek authorities penalized peaceful protesters or individuals calling for participation in peaceful protests. Human rights lawyers, women’s rights defenders, trade unionists and members of political parties were arbitrarily arrested and criminalized for allegedly breaching public health rules and were handed unjustified administrative fines.”



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