

Greek riot police attack students and education workers protesting universities clampdown

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22 September 2022

Greek riot police have brutally attacked students and education workers protesting the introduction of a new campus police force—the University Institutions Protection Teams (OPPI). The OPPI were set up by the conservative New Democracy (ND) government to patrol university campuses.

Thousands protested in Athens and other cities over several days from September 17. The Athens September 17 protest saw a massive mobilisation of riot police, who violently attacked students gathered outside the central building of Athens University where a march was scheduled to start. A video tweeted by journalist Savvas Karmaniolas captured the attack. The footage shows police brutally attacking students who are thrown to the ground and hit with batons and tear gas.

A second video posted by Karmaniolas shows water cannons were deployed down main streets to disperse the students.

In other footage, filmed by Ruptly, terrified youth are seen running into a tube station while being sprayed with water cannon.

In Greece's second city, Thessaloniki, a larger demonstration of thousands of students marched through its centre on the same day. The previous day, September 16, riot police assaulted students who were protesting their presence on the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki campus.

The protests follow others earlier this month.

On September 8, thousands of students, teachers and other university workers held a march and rally in Athens' Constitution Square to protest the OPPI. A large banner by the Athens student union at the front of the march read, "University police out of schools! Fight for education—work—life."

The legislation allowing police onto campuses was originally passed in February 2021, but plans to establish the OPPI were stalled for a year after delays in the recruitment

drive and training. The government, which continues to impose crushing austerity measures against the population, has ensured €50 million are available for the 1,000 strong university police and for cameras and turnstiles inside campuses. At this stage the OPPI will be deployed to three university campuses across Athens and at the campus of Thessaloniki University. 260 of the OPPI officers in Athens have been drawn from the special guard units of Attica's regular police force.

A 1982 law, now overturned, passed by the social democratic PASOK government barred police from entering university grounds unless they were granted permission by university administrators. It was passed in response to the bloody crackdown on the 1973 student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic (known as the Athens Technical University) by the military junta which ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974. Forty people were killed in the attack (24 identified, 16 unidentified). To this day the mangled front gates crushed by the junta's tanks can be seen, alongside a monument in remembrance of those who perished.

The large crowds in the Thessaloniki march, despite the heavy rainfall, were also driven by mass revulsion against the riot police's unprovoked attack the evening before against 5,000 concertgoers attending a free gig headlined by singer-songwriter Thanassis Papakonstantinou on the lawn outside Aristotle University's humanities department. The concert was part of the annual Eleftheriako Festival organised by anarchist collectives in the city.

Footage posted by social activist group Menoume Energoi on its YouTube channel shows the moment tear gas cannisters were fired, with the cloud of chemicals slowly descending on the crowd while a band was still playing on the stage. Riot police continued attacking the crowd as they were trying to escape the fumes, as captured by a video from reporter Chris Avramidis.

Testimonies given underscore that it was sheer luck the

police's attack did not result in fatalities. In a statement to the press, anti-police violence campaigner Vassilis Maggos said, "I was at the concert. Everything was fine, people were enjoying the music until the police threw the chemicals. It was criminal not only because they threw them without any cause, but also because the area was closed with only three narrow escape routes. One of those was closed by them after they threw the chemicals."

"The tunnel through the Faculty of Theology remained free from where myself and a lot of other people passed and jumped over the fence into the street. At the third escape route I was subsequently told that they also started throwing chemicals there as well. It's luck that no-one was trampled as people were running. There were many who were trying to calm the situation by asking people who were panicking not to run. I saw people lying down not able to breathe, others at their wit's end from the terrible distress of the situation, others on all fours throwing up. We were all crying. None of us had anything to protect our eyes."

Vassilis's son Yiannis died a month after injuries sustained in a beating by police in June 2020, in the city of Volos, central Greece.

Tensions have been running high at the University of Thessaloniki since the end of last year, after police cleared out the "Steki Tou Viologikou" (Biology Department Hangout) an area within the university run by an anarchist collective for the last 34 years. The pretext used by the university authorities was an intention to establish a science library there. There has been a near constant police presence in the area with frequent clashes between students and police.

Faced with mounting opposition against the authoritarian legislation, the government has opted to tone down the police presence at Athens University by confining OPPI patrols to just outside the borders of the campuses across the city. However, according to conservative daily *Kathimerini*, it still intends ultimately to have the squads patrolling within the university grounds. The paper added that the prerequisite for this is "the implementation of security plans to establish turnstiles at the building entrances."

At his speech at the Thessaloniki International Exhibition on the day of the protests, Alexis Tsipras, leader of the pseudo-left SYRIZA, said that he would abolish the university police if he came to power in the general elections scheduled to take place by the summer of 2023 at the latest.

Such promises commit his party to nothing given that SYRIZA is unlikely to win an overall majority. Moreover, Tsipras's record of radical promises which he then ditches when in power is known by millions. At the start of 2015, SYRIZA was swept to power vowing to end the austerity imposed by the European Union and the International

Monetary Fund. Within days the party extended the hated memorandum with the EU/IMF and a few months later Tsipras junked his mandate and signed a new bailout package, imposing even more brutal austerity measures than his social democratic and conservative predecessors.

In a press conference at the exhibition, two days after his speech, Tsipras even left the possibility open of governing with New Democracy if there was a "state of emergency". According to reports, he is on the best of terms with Nikos Papaioannou, the ND supporting dean of Thessaloniki University who has been overseeing the crackdown on students. Despite the war of words between members of his party and Papaioannou, Tsipras has made a point of stopping by the university stall for a photo-op with the dean for the last two years when visiting the Thessaloniki Exhibition.

While this year Tsipras confined himself to a brief handshake, in the light of the brutal police attack the night before, last year Thessaloniki's main daily *Makedonia* reported the "warm meeting" between the two men at the university's stall, noting, "essentially both main parties desire greater tranquillity and order within universities" while adding that this consensus facilitates "the process of completing the establishment of the university police."

While Tsipras is busy courting his future partners in government, his party postures as a friend of the students to lead opposition to the police measures into safe channels. The University Staff Rally at Thessaloniki University, which is SYRIZA's faction within the lecturers' union, has called for the resignation of Papaioannou. Earlier this year SYRIZA Youth and the University Staff Rally, endorsed a legal challenge at the Council of State—Greece's highest administrative court—mounted by student and university trade union groups against the OPPI. As with virtually all challenges brought before the Council of State, it came to nought after the court ruled in May this year that establishing the university police is constitutional.



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