57 confirmed dead in Greek train crash, as protests and strikes erupt

Robert Stevens
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At least 57 people are dead following Tuesday night's train crash in Greece. They were killed when a passenger train, on route from Athens to Thessaloniki with more than 350 people on board—many of them young students returning to university after a holiday for Greek Orthodox Lent—crashed head-on into a freight train shortly before midnight Tuesday, outside the town of Tempi in central Greece.

According to a report on Thursday by public broadcaster ERT, 52 people remain in hospital in the city of Larissa as a result of the crash. Six people are in critical condition due to head wounds and serious burns. Residents in Larissa, near to where the crash occurred, lined up to give blood—many waiting more than an hour in heavy rain.

Late Thursday, almost 48 hours after the crash, authorities announced that another 56 people on the passenger list were still missing.

The rescue and recovery operation is ongoing amid the completely destroyed and crushed rail carriages. Rescuer Konstantinos Imanimidis told Reuters on Thursday, "It will be very difficult to find survivors, due to the temperatures [caused by fires] that developed in the carriages… This is the hardest thing, instead of saving lives we have to dig out bodies."

On Wednesday, the government announced three days of national mourning, while asserting that the disaster was, according to Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, "mainly due to a tragic human error."

The station master in Larissa, a worker with over 40 years' experience on the railways, has been arrested. But the attempt to pin the blame on a single individual has been widely rejected, fuelling protests and a rail strike against the New Democracy (ND) conservative government.

Workers know that the rail network has suffered years of austerity cuts, including mass job losses. Much of the network, especially in northern Greece, is not automated, relying on manual signalling.

The station master was charged Thursday with dangerous disruptions of transportation, and may face charges of manslaughter through negligence, bodily harm through negligence and dangerous interventions in means of transportation. But evidence is already emerging throwing doubt over claims that human error is to blame.

Kathimerini reported that when the station master appeared before an investigative magistrate in the town of Larissa Thursday, "He allegedly claimed that during his shift he gave an order to change the tracks on the railway network so that the two trains would not move on the same line but that the system apparently did not respond."

The newspaper added, "This version of events is supported by a photograph from the stationmaster's logbook that shows he instructed the fatal Inter City 62 train to continue its journey to Neos Poros, apparently not knowing that the freight train was moving on the same piece of track right toward it."

More evidence points to the catastrophic implications of having large sections of the rail system that rely totally on manual intervention, with no implementation of automated rail systems widely used internationally. *Kathimerini* noted, "A colleague reportedly said in an interview with the media that before the fatal accident another train had come to a standstill at Tempe. And that in order to move the stalled train to the nearest station there were changes to the tracks, but the network was not later restored to its previous state."

The deaths prompted angry protests in Athens, in Thessaloniki where many of the people who died lived, and in Larissa.

In Athens, hundreds of mainly young protesters demonstrated on Wednesday outside the headquarters of Hellenic Train, the privatised company responsible for maintaining Greek railways. They were attacked by riot police, who fired tear gas and stun grenades. Protesters then marched to the Greek parliament in Syntagma Square where police attacked again.

In Larissa, a silent vigil to commemorate the victims of the crash was held. Speaking to the AFP news agency, Nikos Savva, a medical student from Cyprus, said, "The rail network looked problematic, with worn down, badly paid staff." The arrested station master should not pay the price "for a whole ailing system". Larissa-based doctor Costas Bargiotas said, "This is an inadmissible accident. We've known this situation for 30 years".

The BBC reported, "Families have given DNA samples to help identification efforts, with the results expected on Thursday. One of those, a woman called Katerina searching for her missing brother, a passenger on the train, shouted

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‘Murderers!’ outside the hospital in Larissa, directing her anger towards the government and the rail company”.

On Thursday, rail workers in the Federation of Railway Employees began a nationwide 24-hour strike to protest the deaths and the unsafe conditions on Greece’s rail network. A statement by the union said, “Pain has turned into anger for the dozens of dead and wounded colleagues and fellow citizens.” Successive governments, it added, had ignored repeated demands to improve safety standards. The rail network required “hiring permanent personnel, better training and, above all, modern safety technology.” These proposals had always ended up “in the trash can.”

Lines 2 and 3 of the Athens Metro were also suspended for the duration of the rail workers’ action due to a solidarity strike by members of the Athens Metro Workers Union.

That evening, striking workers protested outside Hellenic Railway headquarters in Athens, with thousands then marching to Syntagma Square, with young people joining them—to protest in front of the parliament.

Schoolchildren and students are protesting all over Greece, holding up homemade placards in school yards and using their school bags to spell out words.

In this photo the bags read, “I don’t forget Tempi”, in reference to where the train crash occurred. The sign being held by the students reads, “Their profits - Our lives”. Other bags spell the word “anger”.

Some placards held by students read, “crime“, “murder“, “We will not forget you”, “justice“, and “never again”.

These bags spell “call me when you arrive”. These typical words of every mother are being shared widely on social media to express the grief of the parents who have lost children in the crash.

The train deaths are the result of social crimes for which every political party of the ruling elite shares responsibility. It is their leaders who should be in the dock facing charges.

Under-resourcing and destaffing of an already below standard rail network was accelerated over the last decade with the privatisation of the state-owned railway, TrainOSE, and rolling stock maintenance company, by the pseudo-left SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) government in 2017-18.

SYRIZA was brought to power in 2015 on a wave of protests and strikes after five years of savage austerity. They then trampled on this mandate, imposing, as ND and the social democratic PASOK did before them, a devastating austerity programme. The privatisation of key national economic assets and infrastructure was the price demanded in return for any further loans by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund. SYRIZA carried their instructions out to the letter.

TrainOSE was sold off in 2017 as part of the third austerity package imposed after 2010, with the rail privatisation and sale of other state assets expected to raise €6 billion euros by 2018. It was bought by Ferrovie Dello Stato Italian, the Italian state-owned railway holding company, for just €45 million.

SYRIZA’s Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, at a lavish ceremony in Corfu, presented this as a glorious success. *Naftemporiki*, the daily financial newspaper, reported, “Tsipras explained that the importance of the investment lies in the fact that the country has been spared a great financial burden... in the price itself, but even more so in the size of the investment it will make in the Greek economy, in the Greek railway, amounting to 500 million euros.”

Tsipras’s lies were soon exposed, with the newly privatised firm, renamed Hellenic Railways, making no investments to upgrade the rail network. The reality, as SYRIZA knew well, was that Ferrovie Dello Stato Italian was planning only vast profits. Ferrovie’s CEO Renato Mazzoncini described buying TrainOSE as a “strategic move for the group. It is not so much about buying a piece of Greece at reduced price, but rather about a strategic expansion operation in view of the major investment in the Athens-Thessaloniki line, which is part of the European corridor project.” The European corridor project would be worth about €3 billion, said Mazzoncini.

The horrific human cost was confirmed in an EU report last year on “Railway Safety and Interoperability in the EU”. Greece was the only member state entirely without “train protection systems” that are “widely considered one of the most effective railway safety measures for reducing the risk of collisions between trains.”

Post-privatization, Greece’s rail network is one of the most dangerous in Europe. From 2018 to 2020, according to the European Union Agency for Railways, Greece recorded the highest railway fatality rate per million train kilometres among 28 European nations.

On Thursday, the *Financial Times* reported, “Fifteen days before the worst railway crash Greece has seen in decades, the European Commission had referred the country to the European Court of Justice for ‘failing to fulfil its obligations’ [from 2015 to the present day] under the Single European Railway Area Directive” regarding “infrastructure investments and emergency procedures”.

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