Protests and strikes over deadly Greek train crash denounce government and private rail firm

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3 March 2023

A mass outpouring of anger in the working class and among youth has been unleashed in response to the devastating loss of life in Greece's worst-ever train disaster.

A 24-hour nationwide strike by rail workers which began on Thursday to protest at least 57 passenger deaths—including at least 10 rail workers—was extended to Friday. Later Friday, a 48-hour strike was announced extending the strike across the weekend.

Thousands of workers and youth have protested daily in Athens outside the headquarters of Hellenic Rail, Greece's privatised rail network, and the parliament building. More demonstrations have been held in many of Greece's main town and cities. Around 5,000 gathered at Hellenic Rail Friday, with the word "murderers" daubed on the building.

The protests are a repudiation of the New Democracy (ND) government and the media's attempts to solely blame human error by a station master in the city of Larissa, begun within hours of the disaster. Greece's rail network is unsafe, damaged by years of budget cuts, understaffing and then privatisation. The country is the only one in the European Union (EU) which does not have a national automated train protection system in place.

The deaths were caused when a passenger train, on route from Athens to Thessaloniki with more than 350 people on board, crashed head-on into a freight train shortly before midnight Tuesday, outside the town of Tempi in central Greece.

Almost 40 survivors remain in hospital, seven of them in intensive care. Some on the passenger list are still missing but the exact number is not known. Three days after the crash, some parents still don't know the fate of their children. The *Independent* reported that on Friday, "Panos Routsi … and his wife waited with anguish for confirmation of what had happened to their 22-year-old son Denis." Expressing widely held sentiment, Denis's father said, "They killed him, that is what happened. They are murderers, all of them."

The first funeral of one of the victims, Athina Katsara, a 34-year-old mother of an infant boy, took place in her home town of Katerini on Friday. Her husband who was injured in the crash was in hospital and unable to attend.

The common response of millions of workers is that the Tempi crash is not only a tragedy, but a great crime, bound up with savage austerity imposed on the population by the ruling elite for well over a decade.

Young people in particular have turned out in large numbers at the protests; the majority of the dead were young students returning to university after a holiday for Greek Orthodox Lent. Schoolchildren and students are protesting nationwide in schools and universities. Universities remain closed again in Athens on Friday, due to ongoing rallies.

The third day of official national mourning saw large demonstrations in Athens, Thessaloniki, Larissa—the nearest city to where the crash occurred—and other towns and cities including Patras and Volos. Thousands took to the streets in Athens, chanting "Their profits, our dead." Many came with black balloons in memory of the victims and unfurled a large black banner. In the evening a march of over 1,000 took off from the Propylaia, the central gateway to the Acropolis, and a silent protest of at least 3,000 was later held outside the parliament building in Syntagma Square.

Another march of thousands of young people took place in the centre of Larissa (see video below). They chanted, "This crime should not be covered up, let us be the voice of all the dead." In reference to the government's

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narrative of attracting investment for growth and jobs, and selling off state assets such as the railway system in the name of "development," another chant was, "The rails of development were drenched in blood, we will never forget the crime on the trains."

In the city of Karditsa in central Greece, hundreds of schoolchildren, students and their teachers demonstrated. They marched from the main square to the rail station, where flowers and placards were placed on the rail tracks. A period of silence was held.

A selection of video and photos of the protests in Karditsa can be viewed here.

Throughout Karditsa prefecture, at least 13 secondary schools were under occupation, with pupils arriving holding banners and placards and shouting slogans denouncing the authorities and Hellenic Rail for murder.

A cover-up of how and why the deaths occurred has already begun. The government has appointed what is described as an "independent" committee to investigate the deaths. Minister of State George Gerapetritis has appointed Athanasios Ziliaskopoulos to the body. He served as chairman of the state-owned TrainOSE for five years, before privatisation. He later became chairman of TAIPED, Greece's privatisation fund. TAIPED is overseeing the ongoing privatisations of billions of euros worth of Greece's state assets.

This year, Greece is expected to sell off a long-term concession for its longest highway and a gas company for almost €2 billion. Reuters reported that Greece must "meet an annual €2.2 billion ($2.49 billion) revenue target from state assets… Athens has raised a total of €7.6 billion from privatisations since 2011, a key plank of its three international bailouts which ended in 2018."

All the parties of the ruling elite are implicated in the deaths, having overseen an unsafe rail system for years. Prior to its privatisation, in 2017, TrainOSE's budget was slashed in order to make it a viable entity for the corporate profiteers who bought it, Ferrovie Dello Stato Italiane.

Successive governments were frenzied in imposing austerity. In 2010, the ruling social democratic PASOK government launched a plan to cut TrainOSE's workforce by nearly 40 percent, from more than 6,000 to around 3,700. In the decade since, the New Democracy and SYRIZA governments slashed that even further to leave the national rail network with just 750 workers today.

A 2019 tweet by Kostis Hatzidakis, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs and Vice President of ND, boasted, "OSE was the most troubled company in Europe. We implemented a consolidation plan that saved hundreds of millions and made TrainOSE profitable. Thanks to our interventions, the subsequent privatisation of the company was achieved."

SYRIZA played the most significant role, swept to power in 2015 promising to oppose the austerity offensive being demanded by European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank, widely reviled as the "troika." SYRIZA betrayed this mandate and stepped up the imposition of austerity. TrainOSE and rolling stock maintenance company EESSTY were privatised by the SYRIZA government in 2017 and 2018.

Profits were reaped while basic safety measures were sacrificed. Citing a rail union leader, the *Times* reported Friday, "a state-of-the-art security system had been purchased by the government before the 2004 Athens Olympics but was never installed, leaving Greece's rail system operating 'blind'." The *Guardian* reported Thursday, "A Greek magistrate called for an urgent inquiry into allegations [by the Federation of Railroad employees] that a long stretch of track leading to Athens international airport, used by millions of foreign tourists every year, is operated with inadequate signalling."

On Thursday, the station master, who has not been named by the authorities, appeared in front of a local prosecutor in Larissa and was accused of "pressing the wrong button" then failing to stop the two trains from colliding. The *Times* reported that in his "first testimony, he said he 'realised' his mistake 12 minutes after authorising the passenger train to leave the station despite a red warning signal." The station master requested three more days to provide testimony.

His lawyer Stefanos Pantzartzidis said, "My client has accepted responsibility, but he alone is not to blame. There is a forest of blame that has to be probed. There is also neglect from officials too."

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