Mass protests and strikes over train crash threaten Greek government

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Protests and strikes over the Tempi valley train crash continue in Greece, threatening the survival of the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government. Almost a week after the crash which killed 57 people—with six still critically injured in hospital—an initial one-day rail strike was extended into its sixth day Monday and will continue at least until Wednesday.

The Greek Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY) has announced a 24-hour nationwide strike in the public sector for March 8 and a mass demonstration to be held at noon in Klafthmonos Square in the capital, Athens. Such has been the outpouring of anger among millions of workers that ADEDY said the strike was "to demand - together with all the workers and the people - an end to the policy of privatization, and that the real responsibilities for the murderous crime of the Tempi train crash be attributed."

Strikes have been announced for the same day by the Panhellenic Seamen's Federation (PNO) and the Greek Primary Teachers' Federation (DOE).

The train crash occurred just before midnight last Tuesday when an InterCity 62 (IC62) passenger train heading north from Athens to Thessaloniki and carrying around 350 mainly young people crashed head-on into a southbound freight train.

The crash is the deadliest in Greek history, and the worst in the country for more than 50 years—surpassing the 34 deaths resulting from a head-on collision between two passenger trains near Corinth in 1968. It is the worst in Europe since 80 people were killed in a derailment in Spain in 2013.

Over the weekend, many rail workers, youth and students demonstrated throughout the country, with tens of thousands massing outside parliament in Athens' Syntagma square.

A large banner (see photo above) held by rail workers read, 'It wasn't human error.' A banner from the Union of Attica Metalworkers and the Greek Shipworkers' Industry, referring to the "development" policies of successive governments in which vast portions of state industry were sold off, read, "The rails of development were drenched in blood. Through struggle the train victims will be vindicated." Other placards read, "Down with killer governments", and "Their policies cost human lives".

In Thessaloniki, a banner held up by a student showed a bloodied hand alongside the words, "We're all in the same carriage".

Protesters in both cities were brutally attacked by riot police using tear gas, stun grenades and batons. During their assault riot police even threw a tear gas canister into an Athens underground station. The central Syntagma Square was cleared of protesters within minutes.

Protests continued Monday, with several thousand students marching in the port city Piraeus. A banner (see tweet below) from the Coordinating Committee of Piraeus Students warned the government, "We will become the voice of all the dead, the new generation does not forgive you."

In Athens, student associations assembled 57 chairs outside the Transport Ministry, symbolizing those killed.

Within 24 hours of the crash the ND government and its media backers sought to evade all responsibility for the deaths, and claimed that "human error" by Vassilis Samaras, a 59-year-old station master in Larissa, was primarily responsible.

There was an angry backlash. Millions understand that ND and other governments including the social democratic PASOK and SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) are responsible for creating an unsafe rail system stripped to the bone by over a decade of austerity cuts and run with a fraction of staff required. On Sunday Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis was compelled to issue an apology.

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General elections must be held in Greece before July and a first round date of April 9 had been pencilled in. But this will now coincide with a planned 40-day memorial ceremony for the victims. The *Euractiv* website commented Monday, “New Democracy… has so far been leading all polls. But the train tragedy is expected to have a considerable electoral impact.”

On Sunday, Samaras was charged with negligent homicide and jailed pending trial, after giving testimony for seven-and-a-half hours to an examining magistrate. The station master’s lawyer, Stephanos Pantzartzidis, said afterwards, “My client testified truthfully, without fearing if doing so would incriminate him.”

Just how dangerous Greece’s rail network is was made clear by Pantzartzidis. He said of his client, “For 20 minutes, he was in charge of (train) safety in all central Greece.”

The *Greek Reporter* noted Monday that the station master “Samaras, is reported to have said that on the night of the incident, at around 11 pm, his colleagues left their posts, leaving him to manage the network on his own.”

On Monday, Reuters published a valuable expose confirming that it was a question of when, not if deaths on the horrific scale of Tempi would occur. The report, “Greece train disaster exposes rail network neglect”, by Angeliki Koutantou and Michele Kambas, noted, “Some rail workers and industry sources who spoke to Reuters pointed to remote surveillance and signalling systems, which control train traffic and guide drivers, saying they had not been functioning properly for years.”

The authors explained, “Larissa station had a local signalling system that tracked trains for a distance of about 5 km (3 miles) … That meant station masters had to communicate with each other and drivers by radio to cover gaps and signals were operated manually.”

According to a “railway source”, “That section [where the trains collided] has been a black hole” and “remote surveillance and signalling systems had not yet been set up.”

Reuters reports the devastating fact that this section of track—between the country’s two largest cities and connecting millions of people—was once covered with remote surveillance under the previously state-owned Hellenic Railways Organisation (TrainOSE). But this became a victim of the savage austerity demanded by the hated European Union/International Monetary Fund/European Central Bank “troika” and imposed by successive governments from 2008.

The report explains, “OSE did have remote surveillance in place from 2007 until 2010 at the section where the accident happened, Yiannis Kollatos, a former station master with the company who set up and operated the technology in Larissa, told Reuters.

“But in the years after 2010, that system gradually creaked, with underfunding and workforce cuts leading to faulty maintenance of the equipment, the railway source said.”

Panagiotis Terezakis, a management consultant to OSE, concurred, saying, “After 2011 this system started gradually to collapse. It was not maintained, to the point where the telecommanding system collapsed almost in its entirety.”

Reuters points out that TrainOSE, “was broken up in 2010 under the terms of Greece’s first bailout”—the first of three “shock therapy” austerity packages. “In 2014, OSE ordered a revamp of the remote traffic control and signalling system that was due to be completed in 2016. But nearly a decade later, the equipment has not been installed throughout the 2,500 km (1,550 miles) rail network.”

The authors note the outcome of the brutal downsizing of Greece’s rail network workforce, which stood at more than 6,000 at the onset of the austerity drive. Successive government sacked thousands of rail workers. Following its sale to an Italian firm by SYRIZA in 2017 for the giveaway price of €45 million euros, the *entire national* workforce stood at just 750 last week.

The report explains, “Rail workers, who began a strike last week in response to the disaster, have repeatedly complained about understaffing. ‘There are currently 133 station masters, while there should have been 411,’ said a third official from OSE.” Staffing was at such criminally low levels that “Weeks before the accident, OSE had sought to hire 73 temporary station masters for six months starting April, according to a company document.”

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