Greek government and opposition parties fall in polls due to mass revulsion at train deaths

Robert Stevens
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Three more people were arrested by police Thursday, nine days after the deaths of 57 people in the February 28 Tempi train crash.

Two of those arrested were station masters, who allegedly ended their work shifts early at Larissa rail station on the night of the crash. A Hellenic Rail supervisor was also arrested, accused of placing an inexperienced stationmaster on duty at the time of the crash. That station master, Vassilis Samaras, was arrested within 24 hours of the crash, near Larissa, in which a Thessaloniki-bound InterCity 62 high-speed passenger train and a southbound freight train collided head-on in the deadliest rail disaster in the country's history.

The four arrested are to stand trial on charges ranging from involuntary manslaughter to causing transport disruption and mass bodily harm.

The avoidable mass loss of life, with a carriage in the train setting on fire and reaching furnace temperatures of 1,300 degrees Celsius (2,370 degrees Fahrenheit)—and burning many victims to death—sparked an eruption of protests and strikes which threatens to end the rule of the conservative New Democracy (ND) government and embroils every political party in power over several decades.

Every day since the crash there have been protests, with a general strike held Wednesday in which hundreds of thousands participated. A railway workers strike that began hours after the disaster was extended to Friday.

What has characterised this revolt is a rejection of the government's attempt to evade all responsibility, with Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis declaring within hours of the crash that it was down the "human error" of the station master at Larissa. Placards and banners responded by denouncing the government and the privatised Hellenic Trains as "murderers".

A poll published Thursday by Ant1 TV found that only 12.1 percent of respondents thought it was the "station master's human error/bad luck" that caused the crash, while 87 percent said there are "also other factors responsible that must be sought."

The Tempi train disaster took place on an antiquated rail network, using decades old technology and with drivers and station masters communicating with each other and station masters by walkie-talkies. Such were the cutbacks imposed by successive ND, social democratic PASOK, and SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) governments that only a few hundred workers now run the entire rail network—privatised in 2017 by SYRIZA and sold off for peanuts—down from more than 6,000 in 2008.

Young people who have known nothing but grinding austerity and widespread poverty their whole lives, have turned out en masse. Among their placards and chants during Wednesday's general strike were, "We will become the voice of the dead, the new generation does not forgive you", "State negligence kills", and "We do not forget, we do not forgive". Among their chants were, "Profits drenched in students' blood". Many of the dead were students returning from vacation.

Further protests will be held March 12 in Athens, Thessaloniki, Alexandroupolis, Volos, Larissa, Chania, Patras and other cities, including by students occupying dozens of schools and universities. The trade union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE), PAME, is holding rallies the same day.

At a cabinet meeting Thursday, Mitsotakis was forced to declare, "We take responsibility and we cannot, should not and do not want to hide behind a series of human errors… I want to reiterate a public apology on

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behalf of those who ruled the country over the years, and mainly personally. I assume responsibility."

At the same meeting the government confirmed that an April general election would not be held as planned, with the first and second round of voting put back to May and June.

On Thursday, the first opinion poll on voting intentions released since the crash found that support for ND is at 29.6 percent, a fall of almost 3 percent, over second place SYRIZA on 25 percent (a drop from 25.1 percent) and PASOK on 9.7 percent. The *Greek Reporter* website noted, "The poll shows a significant drop in the popularity of ND, but also SYRIZA and PASOK are unable to reap ND's losses. Political analysts note that the angry and shell-shocked public is joining the pool of undecided voters and the smaller parties, such as the Communist Party (KKE), Yanis Varoufakis' Mera 25, and right-wing populists.

Kathimerini warned of the "sharp plunge of 2.92% recorded on the Athens Stock Exchange on Monday" [March 6] after days of mass anti-government protests had already shook Greece. It raised that, "This shift does not mean that there is a fear of the next government not continuing the course of reforms [read austerity]. It simply reflects the fact that investors currently see a murky landscape politically and prefer to step aside and take a wait-and-see attitude until there is greater visibility."

The turn away from the major parties of state is indicative of a leftward shift within the working class, crushed by years of savage austerity. Millions of households are mired in poverty, while vast portions of the state budget are assigned to military spending with Greece playing a critical role in NATO's war against Russia. *Greek Reporter* noted in a February article, "In the event of military escalation in Ukraine one would expect to see ramped-up US military operations out of Souda Bay and Greece's army base at Alexandroupolis under the terms of the current U.S.-Greece Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement."

Souda Bay "delivers critical logistical support and services to the US and allied ships, as well as aircraft, operating in or transiting the eastern Mediterranean. It is home to approximately 750 assigned military and civilian personnel. The base ensures the combat readiness of assigned units, including ships, aircraft, and detachments."

Greek City Times reported last month that the Athens has finalized plans to buy 20 new F-35 fighter jets from the US at a cost of $80 million dollars apiece. It reported, "Just to buy the first 20 fighter jets, without weapons and not including the cost of training Air Force pilots, will require $1.6 billion… If we add the cost of the F-35 infrastructure, the work to be done by Greek companies, the training of Air Force pilots and the required spare parts for the period from the delivery of the 1st to the delivery of the 20th fighter aircraft, the program's budget may jump to $3.5-3.7 billion."

French daily *La Monde* cited the comments of Elpida Kalpakidi, a 50-year-old teacher in an article on the mood of the population. "This train accident was the last straw. Nothing in Greece works. Education, the health system, public transport, everything's in ruins. This government has done nothing to improve this awful situation in the public sector, but it has spent money on the army and the police!"

The newspaper wrote, "She believes that the country has never recovered from the austerity measures imposed by Greece's creditors (the European Central Bank, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund) in exchange for bailout loans."

Despite mass deaths at the hands of the state, Mitsotakis and the Hellenic Rail profiteers are working to get the railways fully reopened by the end of August. Meanwhile the government is already putting together a plan for the privatization of the water industry as part of a commitment to raise billions more in privatisations by 2025.

European Union Commission head Ursula von der Leyen tweeted this week of discussions she had with Mitsotakis over what "technical support that the EU can provide to Greece to modernise its railways and improve their safety." But not a cent in funding for this is mentioned anywhere, with the EU insisting that Greece continue to honour the terms of the austerity packages enforced faithfully by ND, PASOK and SYRIZA.

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