

General strike and protests in Greece continue over Tempi train crash deaths

Robert Stevens
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Millions of workers took strike action Thursday, with protests held throughout Greece. This was the largest mobilisation yet in response to the Tempi train crash that killed 57 people on February 28.

The general strike was called by the two trade union federations, the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) and the public sector workers umbrella body, ADEDY. It was backed by the All-Workers Militant Front (PAME)—the federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Panhellenic Seamen’s Federation.

The action shut down all transport networks. Rail services have been shut down since the disaster in which a high speed inter-city passenger train carrying 350 people—travelling from Athens to Thessaloniki—collided head-on with a southbound freight train. Members of the Panhellenic Federation of Railway Workers joined Thursday’s strike and protests.

In the capital, Athens Metro services ran for only a few hours to allow participants to get to and from demonstrations; as did services on the tram network. No ships ran between Greece’s islands and many flights were cancelled due to a 24-hour air traffic control stoppage. Public hospitals operated with emergency staff and state schools were forced to close.

As they did during the general strike called by ADEDY on March 8, the police closed Syntagma, Panepistemio, and Omonoia metro stations—all adjacent to major public squares and gathering points—in order to limit attendance in central Athens.

Tens of thousands attended marches and rallies in Athens (see video below with protesters on Panepistimiou Street), Thessaloniki and other towns and cities. At Athens central train station, flowers were laid and candles lit in memory of the dead.

Young people were again prominent in the demonstrations. Students, whose associations have been occupying schools and universities since the crash, were out in force. Most of the deceased passengers were young people, including many students. Twelve of the victims attended the Aristotle University of Athens. A large banner in central Athens held up by a youth contingent on a large demonstration read: “We become the voice of all who died, on the streets of struggle life is won”.

Demonstrations were replete with anti-government slogans and chants rejecting the initial claims of New Democracy (ND) Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis that the disaster was the result of the errors of a single station master in Larissa—the passenger train’s last stop before the crash. Some banners in Syntagma Square outside parliament read, “It was no human error, it was a crime” and “Our dead, your profits.”

A slogan that has gone viral since the crash, “Message me when you get there,”—often used by parents for when their children arrive safely—was also displayed on banners. Young people chanted, “The new generation does not forgive you; the tears have dried up and turned into rage.”

At many Tempi demonstrations, riot police have brutally attacked participants with tear gas, stun grenades and batons. Further attacks took place in Athens yesterday.

Journalist Nikos Sverkos of the pro-SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) *Avgi* posted footage of a police attack with a comment, “The definition of the unprovoked police assault on the march for #Strike16March ... That’s how much they respect the dead in #Tempi.”

Such is the scale of anger, which shows no signs of being quelled more than three weeks after the crash,

that the ND government may not survive. The government was forced to issue an apology for the deaths and pledge that it would make safe a rail network decimated by budget cuts and chronic understaffing, exacerbated by the 2017 privatization of the state-run TrainOSE by SYRIZA in 2017. This was carried out during SYRIZA's enforcement—in alliance with the far right Independent Greeks—of even worse austerity than that imposed by the social democratic PASOK and ND since 2008, at the behest of the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank “troika”.

After the train deaths, ND had to cancel scheduled elections—with first and second rounds of voting originally due to be held in April and May—and has yet to name a new date. Elections have to be held before ND's term expires in July, but this coincides with a 40-day period of remembrance for the victims. The government announced that it intends to reopen national rail services on March 22 with additional staff to monitor safety and mandatory speed reduction rules along sections of the track, with full services to be gradually restored through April 11.

SYRIZA has been unable to win support in the aftermath of the crash. Its polling numbers have remained static. This is due to the understanding of millions, including the younger generation who have known nothing but poverty and a minimum wage of just 700 euros, that Alexis Tsipras's party bears as much responsibility as the other pro-austerity parties for the deaths.

On Tuesday evening, Tsipras was on the *Mega TV* station attempting to whitewash SYRIZA's role in office, particularly its privatisation of the state-run railway. This was to be done only under duress, he lied. The SYRIZA government was “forced, because we had no other choice” due to the austerity memorandum demanded by the troika. This was the memorandum that Tsipras won a landslide election in 2015 by promising to reject. Once in power, SYRIZA agreed to continue with existing austerity measures and then agreed further deals with the troika, beyond even the savage austerity imposed by PASOK and ND. Greece became a test bed for the destruction workers living standards throughout the continent.

Tsipras told *Mega TV*, “The government of the New Democracy understands security only to appoint and

hire police officers. We don't have doctors, we don't have nurses, we don't have teachers, we don't have station masters.” But the same criticism applies to his government, which did nothing to reverse budget cuts and understaffing of the public sector and rail network.

According to official TrainOSE figures, the company employed just 637 workers over the entire rail network on December 31, 2017—the year in which SYRIZA sold it to the Ferrovie Dello Stato Italian, the Italian state-owned railway holding company, for just €45 million. New TrainOSE hires (93) hardly exceeded the number of workers retiring that year (71) as the company was made as lean and profitable as possible for its new owners. Ferrovie had to change virtually nothing, as it boasted of massive profits to come in a “strategic expansion operation”. A year later the railway company employed just 659 workers.

Tsipras acknowledged that SYRIZA has not seen an increase in support since the crash rocked the ND government, before stating that what was underway was an “uprising” of people who are up to 30 years old. These young people, he said, were not the same as workers who rose up to oppose austerity measures in the past decade, expressing his fear that recent demonstrations over the crash were a “spontaneous reaction... to the entire political system.” They “will affect the outcome of the elections”.

Coming from Tsipras, a trusted representative of the Greek capitalist class and its state, this is a warning to the working class. Tsipras knows that opposition to the entire political set-up is entrenched and has grown as a result of the Tempi crash. For the SYRIZA leader this opposition must be stifled and controlled, with his party readying itself to do so.



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