

SYRIZA's responsibility for Greece's Tempi train deaths

Robert Stevens
10 April 2023

“For working people, a SYRIZA government would not represent a way out of the crisis; on the contrary, it would represent an enormous danger. Despite its left-wing façade, SYRIZA is a bourgeois party that rests on affluent layers of the middle class. Its policies are determined by union bureaucrats, academics, professionals and parliamentary functionaries, who seek to defend their privileges by preserving the social order.”

“The election in Greece and the political tasks of the working class”, *World Socialist Web Site*, January 24, 2015.

“Only four days after Greek workers and youth voted overwhelmingly to reject the dictates of the EU, the SYRIZA government has presented a proposal for €13 billion in austerity measures for the consideration of European finance ministers and government heads meeting this weekend. The Greek government is hoping the brutal measures will secure it a €53 billion EU bailout.

“The proposal, which was approved overwhelmingly by the Greek parliament Friday morning, is even more savage than the €9 billion austerity package Greek voters rejected in the referendum.”

“SYRIZA's betrayal of the Greek working class”, *World Socialist Web Site*, July 10, 2015.

Millions of workers and young people in Greece have protested in demonstrations and strikes since the preventable deaths of 57 passengers and railway staff in the February 28 Tempi train crash.

The victims, mostly young students returning from holiday, suffered horrific deaths when a high-speed intercity passenger train carrying 350 people—travelling from Athens to Thessaloniki—collided in the Tempi valley head-on with a southbound freight train.

Those protesting know the fatalities could not be passed off as an accident, and that they were not the responsibility of a solitary station master, as the New Democracy (ND) government claimed. The collision was a crime resulting from a terrifyingly unsafe train network caused by years of cuts and its eventual privatisation in 2017.

After four years in opposition since being voted from office for pursuing a brutal austerity offensive—SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) is now campaigning to return to office in the upcoming general election as a “progressive government”.

This claim is a filthy lie, and many understand this very well. It is 2023, not 2015, and millions of workers in Greece have suffered job losses and devastating attacks on their working conditions, pensions and living standards at the hands of SYRIZA.

Following the fatal collision, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras visited the crash site and shed crocodile tears, as he declared, “The tragedy is not a matter for party political dispute but of a collective dispute between the whole of society and those attempting to cover up the truth.” Tsipras tweeted on March 1 that he was “Shocked by the unspeakable tragedy at Tempi. It's unthinkable what happened.”

Not unthinkable at all. SYRIZA played a critical role in the events

leading to the crash.

The Tempi deaths occurred on New Democracy's watch, but SYRIZA bears no less responsibility due to its betrayal of a mass movement of the working class during the last 15 years. Tempi was the result of policies pursued by Tsipras's government from 2015-19, which deepened an austerity offensive against the working class without precedent on the European continent.

SYRIZA, as part of a privatisation spree carried it out in office, was responsible for selling off Greece's state railway, TrainOSE, for peanuts (€45 million euros) to Italian railway operator Ferrovie Dello Stato Italiane (FSI). Privatisation left the entire railway service unsafe, with rail workers forced to rely on antiquated technology, including manual signalling systems.

Tsipras's insincere handwringing was challenged by Greek workers and youth, with replies to his tweet including:

“Yeah you're shocked you fool. You also sat on the PM's chair, but you didn't touch the safety systems that should have been put in place. You can also get stuffed.”

“It's unthinkable that OSE was sold off for 45 million euros, which is what a train with five carriages costs. It's unthinkable that that there is no audit mechanism six years now, but only subsidies [to the new owners of the railway].”

“If only you'd thought about this Alexis when you sold off OSE”.

“You're all to blame Alexis, it's just that the bomb blew up in someone else's hands. You're also responsible”.

“When you sold [the railways] to Italian monopoly entities, wasn't it unthinkable then? Oh I'm sorry 'now is not the time to hand out blame”.

SYRIZA: the party of austerity and privatisation

Workers in Greece had already been bled dry after years of austerity imposed by successive PASOK (social democratic) and (conservative) ND governments by the time SYRIZA swept into office in a landslide victory in January 2015. SYRIZA was elected on a mandate to oppose austerity, but the first move of Tsipras and his Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis was to agree its continuation. Within a month of coming to power SYRIZA agreed with eurozone financial ministers to “refrain from any rollback of measures and unilateral changes to the policies and structural reforms.” SYRIZA agreed to prepare further “reform measures, based on the current arrangement,” specified in the hated Memorandum—which Tsipras had previously promised to repudiate—a pledge it carried out to the letter incurring the hatred of millions of workers.

The following year, the SYRIZA-dominated parliament voted through the “Superfund,” a privatization agency, managed by Athens but

supervised by the European Union (EU).

The Superfund (Hellenic Company of Assets and Participations) is to remain in operation for 99 years and merged several companies, including the privatization agency TAIPED. Fully half of the funds from the sell-off of state assets were earmarked to pay off debts.

TAIPED, established in 2011, had already concluded 25 privatisations including the Elliniko airport site, several hotel resorts, and vast stretches of land, beaches and state property. Fourteen regional airports were readied for sale and these would form SYRIZA's first major privatisation. The airports were sold off in November 2015 to Germany's Fraport-Sntel consortium for just €1.23 billion euros on an initial 40-year lease. The remaining 22 airports are now being primed for sell-off.

SYRIZA's next major privatisation, concluded August 10, 2016, was the sale of the Port of Piraeus, one of the most critical pieces of infrastructure in Europe, to Chinese shipping company Cosco. Cosco paid just €280.5 million to secure a 51 percent stake in Piraeus.

This laid the basis for SYRIZA's privatisation of state-owned train operating service TrainOSE in 2017 for €45 million and the rolling stock maintenance firm the following year for just €22 million. This was the completion of a process in which PASOK, ND and SYRIZA ensured that TrainOSE was slashed to the bone, including reducing labour costs to levels imperilling the population, and that would prove so deadly.

In 2010, the ruling PASOK government launched a plan to cut TrainOSE's workforce by nearly 40 percent, from more than 6,000 to around 3,700. Ticket prices were raised by more than 60 percent, and a large section of lines closed.

In the decade that followed, PASOK, New Democracy and SYRIZA governments slashed TrainOSE even further. Research by the *2020mag* website published on March 6, described Tempi as a "predetermined national tragedy" noting that in 2017, "after 5 years of shrinking the [Train]OSE (55% reduction in staff and 45% reduction in salaries)" partial privatisation was carried out. "On 14 September 2017, the Hellenic State Property Fund sold 100% of the shares of the company operating and managing all transport, TrainOSE, to the Italian FSI (Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane) for €45 million. 4 years later, in 2021, the transition period is completed and TrainOSE is renamed Hellenic Train."

Tsipras declares railway privatisation great success

The sell-off was announced by SYRIZA and Ferrovie Dello Stato Italiane at a lavish ceremony in Corfu, with Tsipras declaring it 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."

There was no investment. As *2020mag* research noted, "Trains from the 1990s were presented as new! But we didn't see any improvement in service either. And technical problems are increasing at an exponential rate. For 2023 alone (less than 60 days) we had 25 failure notices from Hellenic Train!"

Thousands of rail workers were laid off. As WSWS noted in a previous article, "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. 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."

By the time of the crash Greece's railway had just 750 workers. On the night of the crash, for 20 minutes the station master at Larissa—a single worker—was in charge of train safety in all central Greece!

A 2019 tweet by Kostis Hatzidakis, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs and vice president of ND, boasted of what was a joint ND/SYRIZA operation: "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."

In carrying out the TrainOSE privatisation, SYRIZA implemented to the letter the 2010 declaration of Poul Thomsen from the International Monetary Fund, and a representative of the hated "Troika" (IMF, EU, European Central Bank) who shouted, as he threw a folder to the ground containing the state rail firms' accounts, "Shut it down!"

A January 2019 Eurobank analysis of the Greek privatisation programme reveals that SYRIZA oversaw well over €3 billion of more than €6 billion in state asset sales:

- 2011-2012: €1.17 billion - PASOK
- 2013: €1.04 billion - New Democracy-PASOK
- 2014: €419.6 million - New Democracy-PASOK
- 2015: €289.2 million - SYRIZA
- 2016: €498.3 million - SYRIZA
- 2017: €1.38 billion - SYRIZA
- 2018: €1.03 billion - SYRIZA
- 2019: €1.21 billion (SYRIZA was voted out of office in July 2019, replaced by New Democracy)

The terms of the sale of TrainOSE were so onerous to the Greek state that they have never been published. But the *investigate-europe.eu* web site published important details in a February 2022 exposé. Their article notes, "The privatisation contract remains secret, but people familiar with its terms, such as the current [ND] vice-minister for infrastructure and transport, Giorgos Karayannis, dub it 'colonial'. This is unusually strong language from a member of a conservative government. The Greek transport ministry has agreed to subsidise the Italian company to the tune of €50 million a year to run certain routes, as outlined in a Public Service Obligations (PSO) contract."

The PSO contract "also remains secret, despite Freedom of Information requests submitted by opposition MPs. Thus, passengers in Greece can only complain about subsidised routes being scrapped or neglected, without being able to prove a breach of contract. Meanwhile, PSO contracts between railway companies and most other EU governments, including between Ferrovie dello Stato and the government of Italy, are public."

Syriza ensured that €700 million in debts was wiped off the state firm's balance sheet to make it more attractive to the Italian state carrier. This debt was transferred to the public purse.

The way forward for Greek workers and youth

Since the Tempi crash, New Democracy has seen a fall in opinion polls, with mass anger at the horrific death toll cited as a major factor. While it previously held a lead over SYRIZA of up to 10 points, its average lead in latest polling is still around 5 percent—with the first round of voting for the Greek general elections to take place on May 21.

Tsipras' polling numbers have remained static, confirming that millions of Greek workers and youth know that SYRIZA, like ND and other pro-austerity parties, played a major role in preparing the ground for February's collision. The younger generation has known nothing but

poverty and a minimum wage of just €700 a month. Its sympathies have been with the railway workers, opposing all efforts to scapegoat employees and shift blame for the enormous loss of life.

Mass demonstrations this past month in Greece, including two general strikes, saw workers and youth denouncing the deaths as “murder”, and a “crime”, as they demanded justice and pledged to “speak for the dead”.

Tsipras, a trusted representative of the Greek ruling elite—and a politician who well understands the threat from below—described the mass movement over Tempi as an “uprising”. Greece’s mass protests take place amid an eruption of class struggle all over Europe, as tens of millions of workers fight back against governments of the rich continent-wide, epitomised by the mass revolt in France against the Macron regime’s attacks on pensions.

But for justice to be achieved Greek workers and youth must transform their spontaneous outrage into a politically conscious movement against the capitalist system and the political parties that prop it up.

It is not a solitary station master that should be in the dock for Tempi, but Tsipras and all the other political criminals whose political decisions created an unsafe rail network. Neither can justice cannot be achieved outside of a political rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy on which SYRIZA and all successive Greek governments have relied for decades to suppress opposition to austerity.

The only political tendency which opposed SYRIZA from the outset, from the left, was the International Committee of the Fourth International. The ICFI made numerous timely warnings as to the class character of SYRIZA as a tool of the capitalist state, doing the bidding for the banks and corporations.

In its New Year statement posted on January 3, 2020, the ICFI explained that the coming decade would be one of “intensifying class struggle and world socialist revolution.”:

“The growth of the working class and the emergence of class struggle on an international scale are the objective basis for revolution. However, the spontaneous struggles of workers and their instinctive striving for socialism are, by themselves, inadequate. The transformation of the class struggle into a conscious movement for socialism is a question of political leadership.”

Today, the decisive issue for all those seeking justice for the Tempi deaths is the building of a new political movement of the working class, independent of all the parties of the capitalist ruling elite. This requires the building of a Greek section of the ICFI.

We encourage protesters and workers throughout Greece to get in touch with the WSWS about your thoughts on the Tempi rail deaths. Contact us here.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact