

Protesters speak out at global demonstrations marking three years since Greece's Tempi rail crash deaths

Our reporters
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Over 100 demonstrations took place in towns and cities across Greece on Saturday to commemorate the third anniversary of February 28, 2023 Tempi rail disaster which took the lives of 57 mainly young people, including 11 railworkers. Dozens more protests were again held in cities across Europe, in the United States and Australia.

The horrific deaths following the collision between a freight and passenger train were a crime of capitalism, resulting from an unsafe train network caused by years of cuts by successive governments and its eventual privatisation in 2017. These included the 2015-19 Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government, which was responsible for the railways privatisation.

The biggest demonstration took place in Syntagma Square in central Athens, with tens of thousands gathering outside the parliament building. Many brought home-made placards and flowers were laid in the square where the names of the dead had been written in red in front of the parliament.

The rallies were accompanied by a 24-hour strike called by the ADEDY public sector union confederation. Railway workers and seafarers also participated, bringing the country's rail and ferry networks to a standstill. In Athens work stoppages hit the city's electric railway and tram network. Labour Centres (trade union bodies) in Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki and in other towns and cities affiliated to the private sector union General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) also struck.

The right-wing New Democracy (ND) government organised a massive police operation against the demonstrations. Police mounted attacks in Athens, Thessaloniki as well as Heraklion, the capital of Greece's largest island, Crete. In Athens alone 174 people were taken into custody with 11 subsequently charged. (*See Athens footage below*).

There were attacks on journalists and reporters as captured by state broadcaster ERT on its live coverage of the demonstration in Thessaloniki, which showed a riot police squad assaulting a group of nine photojournalists. Mega Channel's live coverage in Athens reported that their cameraman was hit directly with a stun grenade. (*See footage below of the Thessaloniki attack*).

Journalist Chris Avramidis filmed the police intimidation of Thodoris Eleftheriadis as he made his way to the Athens demonstration where he was on the speakers list. Eleftheriadis, who lost his mother in the Tempi crash, was stopped by police and threatened with being taken into custody after he refused to have his belongings searched. According to Avramidis, the police backed down and let him go after the intervention of legal observers, other relatives of the Tempi dead and the presence of cameras.

WSWS reporters spoke to protesters in London, Manchester and Edinburgh in the UK and in Stuttgart, Germany about their thoughts three years on.

London

Around 300 people protested outside the Greek Embassy in Holland Park, London. Among their chants were: "They are talking about profit and losses - We are talking about human lives!" *See video below.*

Despoina, a lecturer in finance, said, "It is a big frustration and disappointment and anger about the fact that three years after the criminal incident we haven't seen any progress with justice". She pointed to "all the obstacles" faced by survivors and relatives, adding, "Every political person involved, they have complete impunity... Everyone who's higher up seems like they're getting away with murder and this is literal."

She blamed privatisation, saying, "When a privatisation of the railways takes place we see fatal accidents happening afterwards because the responsibility is so divided... The companies who get the profits, they are not actually held accountable." More broadly, Despoina argued, "Democracy is very much on the downward in Greece. There's not enough free press. There's no independent justice authority" and ministers enjoyed "impunity."

Describing last year's mass protests and a father of a Tempi victim's 23-day hunger strike outside Greece's parliament, Despoina said the ongoing "cover-up... makes people feel disempowered." Asked her opinion of the trade unions who enabled the railway cuts to be carried out by collaborating with successive austerity governments, Despoina replied, "the problem with the trade unions is they are rotten from the head downwards" and that workers "need to unite otherwise we don't stand a chance to take a train and reach our destination alive."

Georgios, a former physiotherapist now employed as a safety officer said, "Three years ago, a terrible thing happened, and in my opinion, it was a murder." It was murder "because the people who were responsible... didn't take the necessary measures to ensure the safety of the people." The protest was "a tribute to those people" and "a voice for maybe something to change in the Greek political life."

Successive governments had undermining democracy and judicial independence, so "There is no democracy anymore, there is no justice anymore because it's controlled by the government." There had been "a lot of covering up." The investigation was "ridiculous" as "First of all, nobody was blamed." An initial commission "invited a lot of people, none of the victims, none of the families, none of the survivors." Even when the case went to court, he said, it proceeded with no witnesses.

Stavroula said, "It's important to protest against all the situations that are happening... and to voice our issues and concerns." The crash was "a very serious thing that happened in Greece," adding there were "accusations of illegal... fuel... [on board the freight train that hit the passenger train] and an attempt to cover it up by the [ND] government."

“The trains used to be publicly owned. But now they are privately owned.” She recalled how workers on the railways had long demanded a safe network: “They have been protesting about this... since I remember in 2014. No one really took them seriously.” She recalled trains breaking down and even catching fire: “One time the roof was on fire... it was going to happen, everyone knew, and no one did anything about it.”

In her view, “the government is responsible,” and blaming a signal operator was “because they don’t want to take responsibility.” Stavroula insisted, “The company needs to be held accountable,” and argued that rail should “go back to be public. That’s why we’re paying taxes.”

IT worker **Ilias** attended with his wife **Glykeria**, a nurse. Ilias said, “We are parents and we want to take care of the future of our children.” Glykeria added, “One of my children could have been on that train”, and three years on “nothing much has changed.” Looking back over more than a decade, both agreed that under many governments of different political stripes “nothing’s changed.”

Regarding the current embezzlement scandal in Greece implicating the GSEE union, they said, “If the government is paying the trade unions to do what the government wants them to do, then that’s not a trade union.”

Manchester

George and **Yiannis** joined a protest of around 50 people who rallied in the city’s St Peter’s Square.

George told the WSWs that the disaster was “a state crime” rooted in years of austerity, privatisation and neglect. It “wasn’t just out of the blue” but the result of policies that cut public funding while prioritising profit.

Linking Tempì to wider safety failures in rail, aviation and industry, including the recent biscuit factory explosion in Greece which killed five workers he said. Yiannis said, “There seems to be an underlying link between corporate greed, the love of profit, against the people’s welfare.. and that has already passed into the governments.”

Noting the bombing of Iran that day by the US and Israel, and the Greek government providing use of its military bases, they said billions could be found for war but not public services. The fight for justice over Tempì was “an international struggle” said George—and not just about one tragedy, but about defending public safety, opposing privatisation and standing “for a better world for everyone.”

Another protester said, “What workers face every day is the profit system. It’s always workers against profit. It’s really good that this goes out internationally [on your website]. The real issue, wherever workers are in the world, is we have to get rid of this system.”

Edinburgh

Around 25 people protested in Princes Street in the centre of Edinburgh. Some brought homemade placards, including one naming all 57 victims. **Elpida** made a homemade placard that had the figure of Justice with a pair of scales tilted in favour of a stack of cash with a blood drenched train carriage on the other side. The phrase underneath read, “Does that look like justice to you?”

Asked about the wider issue of safety, not just on the railways but in workplaces across Greece—as shown by the deadly explosion at a biscuit factory—Elpida said, “All of these testify to the fact that when a system does nothing to protect its citizens this is what happens. I don’t know if

this sounds extreme or not but we need to make big changes not small ones, with people’s needs at the centre and not those of business owners.”

Stuttgart

Around 100 people gathered in Stuttgart, Germany. A leaflet distributed at the protest by the Greek Community of Stuttgart linked the accident in Tempì with train accidents in Germany, saying they were part of a system which puts money over life.

“It’s not just about this accident,” said Spiros who organized the protest. “We have a problem not only with this government but with the whole political system in Greece. We have nobody who represents society.”

He said, “The Tempì ‘accident’ is really a crime coming out of our political system and not just this government. There is a huge oligarchy. Five Greek companies control the political system. The accident is a result of that.”

His colleague added: “The biggest problem in the system here and all over the world is that only money means something. We want to express that we have lives too. We want the money to be for the people and not for war like in Ukraine or Middle East. We want that we, the people, are the centre and not the money and not some global companies who have all the money in their hands.”

Asked his thoughts on the role of the pseudo-left Syriza, he said: “It is the same whatever party is in the government. We had all kinds of governments in Greece that are ‘left’ or right. But the problems stayed the same. The only thing that matters for the system is money and nothing else. You can see that all over the planet: In Venezuela, today, in Iran with the bombardment, and for the last four years in Ukraine.”

Giorgos attended with **Vasiliki**. Giorgos said, “There are two aspects” about Tempì. “A lot of people didn’t put any money into safety and security and the guidelines were completely ignored. That’s making people furious because the accident should not have happened in the first place. The second aspect is the cover-up, that they [the government] went after the prosecutors and all that stuff. That means there are things that have not come to light yet. There is corruption in the government and Tempì was just one manifestation of that.

“The reason why a lot of privatisations are happening in Greece is that the government is trying to make money. The privatisation, the underfunding and the cover-up fit nicely in the rest of the picture of a government that is trying to make money at the expense of the wellbeing of its people.”

On the significance of the global protests over Tempì, Giorgos said, “In my opinion it shouldn’t be for just a day. We should have protested again and again every week until something happens. And not just once a year.”



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