

Mass protests in Greece and globally demand end to Tempi rail crash cover-up

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Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in protests in Greece’s main towns and cities on Sunday, and in major cities in Europe and internationally, to demand justice for those who died in the 2023 Tempi train crash. The rallies also demanded an end to a concerted government cover-up after the deaths of 57 people in a preventable disaster.

The scenes recalled the mass protests of the working class which filled up city centres during the movement against austerity in Greece from 2010.

Sunday’s demonstrations were sparked by the leaking on January 18 by the Kontra Channel of audio evidence indicating that some 30 of the 57 victims of the Tempi tragedy were still alive for a period after the crash. They likely died due to asphyxiation or burns, as the collision caused massive explosions and set the front carriages ablaze.

A young woman passenger who called the 112 European emergency number to report the incident is heard on the audio tape gasping, “I have no oxygen”. Her words were adopted as the main slogan of Sunday’s protests, along with “No crime without punishment. Independent justice for all”.

Approaching the second anniversary of the crash—the deadliest in Greek rail history, and worst in Europe since 80 people were killed in a Spanish derailment in 2013—not a single person in ruling circles has been held to account. The leaks went viral and a call was made by the Association of Relatives of Tempi Victims for protests against the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government.

Almost 200 demonstrations were held in Greece and across the globe. Two of the largest protests in recent years—of many tens of thousands—were held in Athens, outside the parliament in Syntagma Square, and in the country’s second city, Thessaloniki (see video below).

Around 500 people demonstrated outside the Greek Embassy in London and the same number in Berlin. Protests were also held in Brussels (on Saturday), and in Edinburgh, Cologne, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Nicosia, Reykjavik and Valetta. In Africa a protest was held in the Egyptian capital Cairo, and in North America protests took place in New York, Boston and Toronto.

In Athens and Thessaloniki, MAT police riot squads attacked protesters with tear gas and batons, injuring in the capital reporter Marios Lolos—former president of the photojournalist union.

The Tempi deaths sparked mass anger in Greece—particularly among young people, with millions taking to the streets—and prompted a general strike the following month. Workers and youth rejected initial lies from ND Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis that the deaths were the result of the “tragic human error” of a single station master in Larissa.

As the WSWS noted at the time, “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... 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.”

The size of the latest protests shocked the government and its echo chamber media. The ERT broadcaster initially refused to even refer to the demonstration in Athens, leading to outraged journalists, technicians, administrative and artistic staff at the channel attacking the decision.

They wrote, alongside an accompanying photo showing a section of the enormous crowd in Athens (see X post below): “The massive demonstrations against the crime in Tempi across the country and abroad were downplayed in an extreme manner by ERT. In the news bulletin at 12 noon, at the time when the most massive demonstration in recent years was in full swing in the centre of Athens, the news was presented a full 37 minutes after the start of the bulletin, briefly and without a single image of Syntagma [Square].”

Given the failure of the ND government to prosecute anyone, or even to hold a trial, family relatives took the initiative and commissioned an expert accident investigation committee. It submitted its report last Monday, just after the leaking of the audio files, finding that the deaths of 30 of the passengers, the majority, occurred after the collision between the passenger train and a freight train and were linked to the presence of large amounts of flammable

liquids—not silicone oil from the passenger train’s transformers, as previously alleged by the government.

Calling the rallies, Association of Relatives of Tempis Victims representative Maria Karystianou, whose daughter died in the crash, said, “We demand an immediate investigation into the explosion of the illegal chemical cargo and the fire that burned our loved ones alive.”

From the earliest days, the relatives group has sought to expose the government’s cover-up and delay of justice. In March last year, Karystianou spoke at a session of the European Union’s Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament (PETI) after having presented a petition signed by 1.3 million people calling for the lifting of protections enjoyed by Greek ministers and MPs against criminal prosecution.

Karystianou pulled no punches, saying, “In the first 24 hours after the fatal collision, a government cover-up was ordered for which to this day no one has taken responsibility, even though it has been publicly acknowledged”.

“During the collision, flammable and illegal substances caused a huge explosion that incinerated most of them. This cargo was not even declared. Within five days they moved the debris and filled the area completely. Crucial evidence of guilt was lost,” she concluded, “Today, we and all the Greek people are certain of the cover-up.”

The ruling class in Greece is acutely aware of the danger posed by the resurgent protests. It knows they are motivated not by Tempis alone, but everything it stands for: the ongoing evisceration of the living standards of millions of workers, the looting of society by private companies and the rich, the hopeless future offered to youth by the capitalist class. The protests come amid an upsurge of class struggles in Greece and just two months after a general strike demanding higher pay and an end to austerity.

On Monday, unable to look the other way any longer, the conservative *Kathimerini* warned, “The impressive rallies in Athens, Thessaloniki and dozens of other cities in Greece and abroad on Sunday were reminiscent of the huge protests at the beginning of the bailout crisis and revealed a social sentiment that the political system cannot ignore.”

The pseudo-left opposition party SYRIZA has sought to make political capital from the Tempis crash on the basis that it took place on New Democracy’s watch. It ensured that several of its leading personnel were present at Sunday’s demonstrations.

Speaking to Skai Radio on Monday, Sokratis Famellos, the leader of the now rebranded SYRIZA-Progressive Alliance, said, “Mitsotakis’ responsibility for the attempt to cover up the crime at Tempis has become established within Greek society”. In “response” to “social demand”, SYRIZA wanted to “to coordinate with all progressive parties against

the cover-up plan”.

The deaths occurred after ND took office upon defeating SYRIZA in the 2019 general election, but SYRIZA is just as culpable. Tempis was the result of policies pursued by former SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras’s government from 2015-19, which deepened an austerity offensive against the working class without precedent on the European continent.

The WSWS noted in the article “SYRIZA’s responsibility for Greece’s Tempis train deaths” the fact that SYRIZA, “as part of a privatisation spree it carried 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.”

One of the main slogans of the Tempis justice movement, chanted on every demonstration, is “Their profits, our lives”—a direct reference to the fortunes reaped as a result of the sell-off, which was described by Tsipras as a glorious success story.

No doubt more will be revealed about the pernicious role played by SYRIZA, as well as by the current government.

As part of its cover-up, ND rejected a demand from the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) to act regarding the potential criminal liability of two former transport ministers following the train crash.

POLITICO reported in January last year that in a June 2023 letter from EPPO prosecutor Popi Papandreou to the Greek government, “she noted that during the investigation into the crash ‘suspicions have arisen regarding alleged criminal offences committed by former members of the Greek Government.

“These alleged criminal offences regard breach of duty committed by the former Minister [under SYRIZA] Christos Spirtzis and misappropriation committed by former [ND] Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis.”



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