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Greece's New Democracy government intensifies Syriza's anti-refugee policy

Greece's new ruling New Democracy (ND) party is intensifying the brutal anti-refugee policies of the previous Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government. Speaking for the right-wing ND government, Minister of Migration Policy Giorgos Koumoutsakos called for strengthening Greece's anti-refugee policies, which will increase attacks on refugees and forceful expulsions of refugees from Greece.

Koumoutsakos criticized Syriza and its brutal treatment of refugees for not going far enough, saying: "Unfortunately, the previous government had a low performance when it comes to the issue of returns," meaning that they did not do enough to remove refugees from Greece. He also criticized Turkey, amidst growing tensions between the two countries, for failing "to properly groom the networks of traffickers and is deficient in rigorously monitoring its coasts." A majority of refugees enter Greece from Turkey via the Aegean Sea.

Based on ND's goals of "protecting the borders, tightly monitoring the Reception and Identification Centers and blocking the islands," Koumoutsakos and the ND government are seeking new agreements with the European Union (EU). The aim is to further increase the number of refugees returned to Turkey and bolster the EU's right-wing, anti-refugee policy.

Currently, some 70,000 refugees are interned across Greece. Of these, an estimated 20,000, up from 17,000 in just the last few weeks, languish in deplorable conditions on the islands of Chios, Samos, Lesbos, Kos and Leros. They are squeezed into detention centers,

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which are de facto concentration camps, designed to only hold a fraction of their current populations. The Moria camp on Lesbos was described by the BBC as “the worst refugee camp in the world.” Some 7,000 refugees, many of them children, are forced to live in a camp designed to hold 2,000.

Political responsibility for these horrific conditions lies with the previous Syriza government, which led a brutal campaign against refugees including attacks by riot police, forced evacuations, and the establishment of concentration camps.

A rotten deal between the EU, Turkey and the Syriza government in March 2016 established Greece as the EU’s jailer of refugees. The agreement mandates all refugees entering Greece via “irregular” routes—that is, those making the dangerous journey via boat from Turkey to Greece—will be deported back to Turkey. Only those who can prove that they would be persecuted in Turkey can obtain asylum in Greece. Once in Greece, they are interned until their applications for asylum are processed; a majority are denied and sent back to Turkey.

Refugees deported to Turkey have little hope of ever reaching Europe again: the agreement contains a provision placing asylum applications from people who have previously entered Europe “illegally” at the bottom of the asylum list.

As it develops its plans for police-state repression and attacks on refugees, ND is basing itself directly on the policies and institutions put in place by Syriza. Earlier this month, police and security forces in Athens conducted six sweep operations in under a week. Seventeen people were arrested for drug possession and illegal entry. Of the seventeen, 14 are foreign nationals from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Algeria, Afghanistan and Syria.

The sweeps are part of ND’s plan, dubbed Operation Net, to increase the police presence across Athens. Human Rights Watch recently reported that this operation “will see some 130 armed police officers, incongruously dubbed the ‘Black Panthers,’ patrolling metro stations in Athens.” Additionally, last week the ND announced the ending of the Academic Asylum law, which forbade police from entering school campuses. The ending of the law paves the way for attacks on students, workers and refugees seeking protection from police on campuses.

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The repeal of this law, passed in recognition of students’ role in triggering an uprising that brought down the bloody, CIA-backed “junta of the colonels” in 1974, reeks of dictatorship. As Human Rights Watch remarked, “The Greek government’s new policing

plan for central Athens sounds like a return to the bad old days.” It legitimizes far-right forces and bloody repression of the working class in Greece—in line with the recent Spanish Supreme Court’s ruling legitimizing the 1936 fascist coup or the trivializing of Hitler’s crimes by far-right university professors working to justify an aggressive militarist German foreign policy.

The build-up of security forces and police-state measures targeting refugees are part of the same process. The incitement of nationalist, anti-refugee hatreds by capitalist governments around the world—whether led by conservatives, social democrats or petty-bourgeois pseudo-left reactionaries like Syriza—aims to divert growing anger and opposition in the working class by dividing it along national lines. The authoritarian measures against refugees also prepare the grounds for stepped-up repression of the working class as a whole.

The increase in physical police presence in Athens and the growing repression of refugees doubtless goes hand in hand with a growth of intelligence surveillance of immigrants and the Greek population as a whole. This finds its most concrete manifestation of in the recent installation of a zeppelin balloon, a literal all-seeing machine in the sky, over the Greek island of Samos, one of the five hotspots for refugees.

In a recent interview with the Greek TV channel ANT1, Koumoutsakos said: “A Zeppelin balloon will be installed in Samos in collaboration with FRONTEX which will take a picture of a huge area. That means you know what time the boat is leaving the traffickers, informing the Turkish side, going near you, it’s a set of actions. We seek good cooperation with the Turkish side under the [EU-Turkey] agreement.”

ND is working with Frontex, the EU’s border and coast guard agency, to expand surveillance of refugees entering Greece by sea. In coordination with Frontex, the zeppelin will seek out boats carrying refugees before they arrive to a Greek island and alert Turkish officials. This aerial surveillance dragnet will give the ND government greater information about the whereabouts of refugees entering Greece. It lays the framework for increased denials of entrance into Greece and new and more brutal methods to prevent refugees from entering.

Before ND came to power and inherited the zeppelin, it was Syriza that worked with Frontex to implement it.

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