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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By George Gallanis
15.02.2020

Growth of fascistic attacks on refugees in Greece

In the form of physical violence, state repression and ideological condemnation, refugees in Greece confront growing fascistic attacks. Reflecting an international process of a movement to the right by all capitalist governments, in Greece, the main entry point for refugees into Europe, this is taking a concentrated form in the brutal repression of refugees.

At the insistence of the Greek government, and backed by the European Union (EU), some 50,000 refugees, sealed off from the rest of Europe, live in festering conditions on camps on the Aegean islands of Greece. The brutal conditions and policies imposed upon refugees by the right-wing New Democracy (ND) Greek ruling party are directly linked to the policies and attacks on refugees by the previous pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) government. Syriza, brought into power posing as a left-wing, anti-austerity party, attacked workers by imposing brutal austerity measures and waged a deliberate campaign of repression on refugees.



Riot police attack refugee refugees with tear gas in Mytilini, Lesbos [Credit: Manolis Lagoutaris/*InTime News* via AP]

The growing attacks on refugees demonstrate that the defense of refugees, and of all workers, must be based on the Greek and international working class, against right-wing parties such as ND and pseudo-left groups like Syriza, whose interests reflect those of the upper middle class and the financial elite.

Last Monday, some 2,000 refugees demonstrated against the hellish conditions of the Moria detention camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Described by a doctor from the Boat Refugee Foundation (BRF) as a place of “violence, deprivation, suffering and despair,” Moria was designed to house 3,100 but today houses nearly 20,000 refugees in and around the site of the camp. The camp was established under the auspices of Syriza, which created camps across the Aegean islands to detain refugees.

Refugees marched from Moria to Mytilini, the island’s capital, where they were met by armored police units. The police attacked them, administering tear gas among the crowd of men, women and children. As children and people fled for safety, away from the billowing clouds of tear gas, police arrested 40 people. Journalist Franziska Grillmeier described the event to *Al Jazeera*: “There were men holding their kids up, kids who were foaming at the mouth, kids having panic attacks and babies unable to breathe and dehydrating through the gas.”

Protests continued the following day on Tuesday. Refugees shouted “Freedom!” and “Stop the deportations!” and carried banners with similar slogans. Refugees also shouted, “Lesbos people, we are sorry,” expressing solidarity with the island’s residents.

The online newspaper *Sto Nisi* reported that a group of 15 to 20 masked neo-Nazis armed with clubs and helmets terrorized the streets of Mytilini and the area around Moria following the demonstrations, in search of foreigners and NGO workers and volunteers who work with refugees. According to eyewitnesses, they knocked on doors of houses in search of aid workers and even tried to break into a café.

An eyewitness told *Sto Nisi* that police were fully aware of the gang and turned a blind eye to them. “Five meters away [from the gang] was a parked police car which was there for around 20 minutes,” he said. “At that point they spotted me and started to shout abuse at me. I didn’t take any notice, but what struck me was the fact that the policeman in the car didn’t even make a pro forma attempt to stop them.”

He continued, “What I want to stress is that any action by the fascists was carried out with complete tolerance from the police. The police knew from early on who these guys were, where they were going and what they were capable of.”

There exists a large contingent of Greek police who support the fascist Golden Dawn party, who previously **violently attacked refugees** and whose members are accused of murdering leftist hip-hop musician Pavlos Fyssas. Videos surfaced in December of Greek police performing “pushbacks,” illegal deportations of refugees back into Turkey that stand in violation of international law and violate both the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Geneva Convention.

Sto Nisi also reported of far-right posts on social media spreading lies about refugees raping women, defecating in churches, attempting to blow up a power plant, burning fields and houses.

One of the posts read: “In Mytilini we will take up arms! We are already sleeping with these! There are rumors that a group of locals is planning to blow up the Moria hot spot! There will be war! It’s no longer a question of racism. If this is true we will be with them. Yesterday [refugees] tried to blow up the PPC power plant. These invaders have taken over our islands!”

Last Thursday, prompted by growing pressure from refugees and workers, police on Lesbos arrested seven people on suspicion of planning attacks on refugees following last week’s demonstrations. The men, aged 17 to 24, were found with makeshift clubs and a metal rod.

Late January, protests were held across multiple Greek islands housing refugee detention centers. The headline speaker on the island of Lesbos was Costas Moutzouris, a previous member of the ruling ND party who ran for Northern Aegean Prefect as an independent. Using the language of fascists, Moutzouris **placed the blame of the social crisis in Greece on refugees**, “They are forcefully trying to impose a different way of life and religion on us,” he said. “We will not accept this.”

During his election campaign last summer for the post of prefect, Moutzouris was asked to comment on rumors that the fascist Golden Dawn party supported his campaign. Moutzouris replied, “If there was, is or will be any support from Golden Dawn then this is welcome.”

Amidst the backdrop of threats to refugees, there is a concerted effort by the Greek state and Greece’s bourgeois media to attack NGOs. This was similarly pursued under Syriza,

which **jailed professional swimmer Sara Mardini** and three other members of the ERCI (Emergency Response Centre International) for helping refugees. Last week, on the insistence of ND, the Greek parliament passed a law restricting NGOs. Greece's prime minister remarked the new law will prevent NGOs from operating "unchecked" and will be "strictly vetted."

Without evidence, Giorgos Koumoutsakos, ND's deputy migration minister, accused NGOs of inciting last week's protests on Lesbos and of taking advantage of refugees for money. Koumoutsakos told Greece's Proto Thema Radio that NGOs had appeared "like mushrooms after the rain" and "some behave like bloodsuckers."

This has been echoed, without criticism, by Greece's right-wing *Kathimerini* newspaper, which wrote on Monday, "NGOs that are operating in Greece without any accountability to the Greek state, with officials expressing fears that the groups might have shady agendas such as inciting migrants to protest or collaborating with traffickers."

Such measures in fact only feed into the fascistic conspiracies being promoted by right-wing groups and academics, and seek to further chip away what little support refugees receive. Moreover, the NGOs serving refugees in Greece often consist of on-the-ground volunteer staff, comprised mostly of students and workers from around the world. The attacks on NGOs are a further attempt to dismantle the growing solidarity between workers internationally and the plight of refugees.

A thousand threads tie the fascistic thugs on the streets hunting down refugees to the ruling Greek capitalist party. The policies of New Democracy—state violence against refugees on a mass scale—express themselves in the individual acts of violence and terror by the fascistic thugs. Every capitalist party across the world seeks to divert the growing class struggle. In Greece, this is done by scapegoating desperate refugees, fleeing imperialist violence, for the social crisis for which Syriza and now ND are wholly responsible. As the class struggle continues to intensify, the attacks on refugees will only continue unless the Greek working class intervenes.

In January, the ND government announced it would begin testing water barriers, an aquatic version of Trump's border wall, along a 2.7-km stretch of the coast off the island of Lesbos to block refugees attempting to enter Greece by sea.

On Monday, Notis Mitarachi, ND's minister for immigration and asylum, revealed plans to set up new closed camps for detaining refugees on Greece's Aegean islands in March. The new camps are expected to open in the summer and are designed to house 20,000

refugees three months at a time. The camps will likely replace the current open-air camps, like Moria on Lesbos.

The centers will function as de facto jails that allow more control over the refugee population, completely closed off from the public eye. ND government spokesman Stelios Petsas said, “These closed facilities will be governed by strict rules and [limitations] for movement for the occupants.” He continued, “Occupants will receive exit cards for controlled leave, while the structures will remain closed at nighttime.”

World Socialist *14 February 2020*