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Hundreds of thousands strike and protest Greece's mass train crash deaths

Hundreds of thousands walked out on strike and protested in Greece Wednesday, amid a surge of anger over the deaths of 57 people in the February 28 Tempi train crash.

Protests were held during a public sector general strike in at least 80 towns and cities throughout Greece's mainland and on many islands. These were the largest protests against the conservative New Democracy government since it came to power in 2019 and were on a scale equal to the mass demonstrations against the imposition of savage austerity by the European Union and International Monetary Fund from 2008 onwards. The *Press Project* website headlined its report, "The whole country is on the streets."



Demonstrators gathering in front of the Parliament at Syntagma square in central Athens during a protest for victims of the February 28 Temp rail disaster, Wednesday, March 8,

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2023. Striking public sector workers, ship workers and young people protested the deaths of 57 people in the train collision. [AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris]

Hundreds of thousands protested in the largest cities: Athens, Thessaloniki, Patras, Piraeus and Larissa. Over 100,000 demonstrated in Athens, with the city's name trending on Twitter. Even police, who routinely play down the size of protests, put the numbers in the capital at 60,000. At least 30,000 demonstrated in Thessaloniki (see tweet below).

It was between Athens and Thessaloniki, in the Tempi valley near the city of Larissa, that the crash occurred, when a Thessaloniki-bound InterCity 62 passenger train and a southbound freight train collided head-on in the deadliest rail disaster in the country's history.

The following day rail workers walked out nationwide in a strike that has extended the whole week through Wednesday's general strike.

The general strike was called by the Greek Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY), the largest public sector body. Ships remained docked at ports due to a strike by Panhellenic Seamen's Federation members. The Greek Primary Teachers' Federation also struck, with teachers and university workers backing mass demonstrations predominately made up of young people. At least 26 schools and university departments were under occupation nationwide during the general strike. Most of those who died in the train crash were young, with 12 of the victims students at the University of Thessaloniki.

Subway services ran for several hours to allow demonstrators to get into central Athens. Authorities tried to reduce protester numbers, with the police shutting the main central city metro stations. This didn't stop masses of people flooding into Athens's main Syntagma, Omonia and Klafthmonos squares and marching through the city.

The Mitsotakis government did all it could to evade responsibility and lay the blame on the "human error" of a solitary station master at Larissa. Working people and youth never bought this fraud, knowing that the crash was caused fundamentally by the running down, destaffing and then the privatisation of the rail network carried out by the SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) government in 2017.



Cranes remove debris after a trains' collision in Tempi, about 376 kilometres (235 miles) north of Athens, near Larissa city, Greece, Thursday, March 2, 2023. Rescuers using cranes and heavy machinery on Thursday searched the wreckage of trains involved in a deadly collision that sent Greece into national mourning and prompted strikes and protests over rail safety. [AP Photo/Vaggelis Kousioras]

So unsafe are the railways that an automated computer system that would have prevented the disaster is not in place nationally. It was revealed during testimony by the station master before a magistrate that at one stage on the night of the crash he was in charge of the entire rail operation in central Greece for a 20-minute period.

Thousands of protesters brought their own homemade banners on Wednesday and chanted anti-government slogans such as, “Our lives matter, there must be no cover-up”, “Murderers!”, “We are all in the same carriage” and “Our children’s life above everything.” In Athens Omonias square, thousands of youth and students carried banners and placards reading, “We will become the voice of the dead, the new generation does not forgive you”, “State negligence kills”, and “We do not forget, we do not forgive”. Among their chants were, “Profits drenched in students’ blood”.



Demonstrators hold a banner reading in Greek "Murderers" during a protest for victims of the Tempi rail disaster. Athens, Wednesday, March 8, 2023. [AP Photo/Thanassis Stavrakis]

In Larissa, the nearest city to where the crash occurred, protesters chanted, "No to profits over our lives!", "Grief and rage", and "Their profits our dead".

The *Press Project* reported on a "massive march in the main streets of Patras, in which pupils, students, public and private sector workers, teachers, health and local government workers, organisations, collectives etc, participated, while shops remained closed for two hours."

Thousands demonstrated on Greece's largest island Crete, with large rallies in Heraklion and Chania.

As in many protests since the crash, heavily armed riot police were mobilised and violent attacks made on demonstrators. using tear gas, stun grenades and batons.

The events were followed widely on Twitter, along with the hashtags on [#Tempi](#)". One tweet, alongside a photo of the mass mobilisation in Thessaloniki, read, "Historic protests taking place in Greece. People know, people feel, people understand. What happened in Tempi was not only a human error. It was the aftermath of state's indifference and neglect."

The outpouring of anger throughout the working class is an existential crisis for the ND government. Prior to the crash, the government had a lead of around 10 points in the polls, largely due to the discrediting of SYRIZA which proved itself an austerity party when in power. It was preparing to announce a date in April for general elections that must be held before July. These plans have been wrecked by the mass movement, with 40 days of commemoration for the dead underway. On Tuesday, Mega TV reported, after the government was forced to cancel a scheduled Friday announcement on the election, that Mitsotakis has put back the first round of the election to May 21, with the second round of voting on July 2.

The tragedy in Tempi and the demand for retribution was the catalyst for the huge protests in Greece; millions are acutely aware that such a terrible event is the result of a rotten system. The decrepit state of Greece's rail and public transportation system is only one result of a mass austerity offensive carried out by ND, the social democratic PASOK and SYRIZA over more than a decade. Vast areas of Greece's infrastructure, including the state-run TrainOSE network that once employed thousands of workers, were privatised and sold off to global conglomerates, with huge profits reaped.

Greek daily *Kathimerini* noted Tuesday findings from the annual report of the Trade and Services Institute of the Hellenic Confederation of Commerce and Entrepreneurship (INEMY ESEE). It reveals a staggering lowering of living standards, after successive pro-austerity governments imposed brutal budgets demanded by the hated EU-IMF-European Central Bank “troika”.

While in 2008 more than a third of Greek households had a monthly income of over €2,200, now only 18.52 percent belong to this income category.

In the 10 years from 2008, “Very poor households became even poorer and much of the middle-income class was driven to impoverishment, while wealth was concentrated in the hands of even fewer than in the pre-2009 era.”

Kathimerini notes from the INEMY ESEE study, “In 2008 the households with an average monthly income of up to €750 were 193,747 out of a total of 4,072,175. By 2018 they had more than doubled, reaching 521,223, and now [with austerity declared long over] they are 404,966.”

Greece was used as a test bed by the capitalist class for policies that would be rolled out across Europe. In an offensive that continues to this day, millions of workers throughout the continent have seen their pay and pensions slashed and working conditions ripped apart to serve the profit interests of the banks and corporations.

The fight in Greece for justice for the dead at Tempa is part of wider European movement of the working class. This week alone, millions in France struck to force a stop to “President of the Rich” Macron’s pension cuts. A nationwide general strike was underway in Italy as workers took to the streets in Greece. A national strike by transport workers in the Netherlands also began Wednesday and national strikes by public sector workers are taking place in Belgium on March 9 against the underfunding of public services.

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