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Greece

Rail disaster in Greece: “Our dead, their profits”

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On Wednesday 1 March, the newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* (Ef Syn) published an article on a very serious incident that occurred at Palaiopharsale station, south of the city of Larissa, 120 km from Thessaloniki: a 25,000 volt cable had come loose and was hanging over a train carrying 450 passengers, fortunately without touching it. Once again, disaster was averted. But as this article, written the day before, was being read on Wednesday morning, the long-feared disaster had just occurred the evening before.

In the region of Tèmbi, north of Larissa: a train carrying 350 passengers collided at full speed with a goods train, after the former had been mistakenly switched to the same track as the latter. The toll was terrible, after the locomotives and the first wagons exploded under the impact and caught fire: at least 57 dead, among them the 7 railway workers of the two trains. Since Wednesday morning, intense emotion and anger have been rising in Greece against the state of abandonment into which the various governments of the last ten years at least have reduced the railways in Greece, causing the tragedy of Tèmbi despite the numerous warnings.

A disaster foretold

We hear in the French media about the dilapidated state of Greece's railways. However, this is not enough and risks masking the seriousness of the government's responsibilities. Prime Minister Mitsotakis himself is content to deplore the Greek state's fatal inability to modernize the network. Worse: offering on the one hand the resignation of his transport minister - a nephew of former Greek right-wing leader Karamanlis appointed there just to "broaden" the right-wing spectrum - Mitsotakis decreed that the accident was above all due to human error, that of the Larissa station manager on duty that evening. Although the station manager admitted that he had not realized that he had allowed two trains arriving in opposite directions to run on the same track, this new demonstration by Mitsotakis of shirking responsibility when everything goes wrong provoked a strong reaction from the experts and reinforced the popular anger.

In fact, you only have to read the press - not the ruling-class press, unfortunately the most numerous... - to know that since last summer there have been three derailments, without forgetting the cancellations of journeys, breakdowns of all kinds, the repurchase of old trains that Switzerland no longer wanted...

The accident at Tèmbi highlights an unimaginable aspect: while Greece has the equipment to install remote traffic direction and automatic light signalling - the European Union has paid 700 million since 2014 for the Greek railways - this essential equipment has stayed in the store rooms. And on the part of the network where the accident occurred, the EU had ordered its implementation since 2020...

As a result, traffic coordination is done orally between station managers, from station to station. This is a long-established practice, but to avoid the obvious risks, two conditions must be met. Firstly, the station master must be able to follow the traffic. In Larissa, until recently, there were two staff in this position in the evening, but one was removed. The second condition is that the staff must be competent. It seems that the Larissa station manager, who has been in post for a month or two, has not had all the necessary training, and that he was appointed on political criteria by Mitsotakis' New Democracy. This is a public assertion that remains to be proven, but it would make the Prime Minister's accusation against the stationmaster alone even more derisory.

This would not be surprising, however: competence is not the criterion of this government, which swears by communication. Again, in a tragic example, the president of a train drivers' association noted that Mitsotakis, as part of his election campaign, had planned a festive rally on Thursday to salute... the wonderful existence of the Northern Greece Remote Traffic Management Centre! The initiative was of course cancelled, but what could the Prime Minister have said about a centre that does not actually exist?

What does exist, however, is the resignation in 2022 of the national head of remote signalling and control equipment, discouraged by the lack of progress. And it also this union address on 7 February about the imminence of a serious accident if no real improvements were made immediately, and calling for an urgent mobilization with local GAs. Management's response to the union warnings was to threaten legal action or sanctions against the "defamation" represented by these warnings of a coming disaster.

An exemplary capitalist policy choice of flight to safety

All this is part of a framework that experts and railway workers are reminding us of these days: the choice to sacrifice the railways to the interests of the private sector and to public disengagement. Giorgos Nathenas, a former adviser to OSE, the Greek railway company, before it was dismantled, reviews some of the stages (*Ef Syn*, 3 March): the break-up of the public company and its professional experience began in 2010, with the start of the crisis and the memorandums under Giorgos Papandreou. More than 60% of the employees were forced to resign or to take up other jobs, often in other sectors (the station manager in Larissa, who had been sorting suitcases until then, seems to have joined the national education system...).

The massacre continues with the splitting of OSE into several entities, including Hellenic Train, a private company in Greece of the Italian SNCF, managing the trains and the maintenance of the tracks. Several private construction companies have their share of the cake, as reported by two railway unionists from Aristera Paremvasi (Left Intervention) in *Prin* (4 March), the newspaper of the NAR group. As a result, OSE, which had up to 13,000 employees, lost thousands of them, and today the network operates with 750 workers instead of the 2,100 provided for in the current framework plan! Nathenas insists on the responsibilities of the current government. The management recently asked for 300 recruitments based on precise technical criteria. The resigned minister Karamanlis had finally granted 70, and he filled the gaps by internal transfers of assignments or by external workers on 6-month contracts.

We can and must therefore speak of a real policy of abandoning public rail transport, whereas Greece had been able to develop a network to the four corners of the country (apart from the islands, of course). Recently, the project of a new modern line for the northwest of Greece was abandoned. The reason: the near-exclusivity given to cars - even though Greece has no car industry -, trucks and coaches. The latter are grouped together in a powerful private group, KTEL, which makes it possible to go to a great many places. Of course, this policy has been accompanied by an “all-motorway” policy that is a boon to the construction and toll companies. The sad result is that today you can go to Thessaloniki on a modern motorway for a minimum price (petrol and tolls) of 100 euros, whereas with the train (and in particular with the latest model that has been put into service, which is said to be ultra-fast but very often late), it is the deterioration of journeys that is highlighted by everyone.

This policy refers to two equally unacceptable logics. One is that of the EU, which is now protesting against the lack of implementation of the projects it has financed, but which is behind the break-up of the public company and its privatization, whose tragic result we can see today. The other is the more specific one of Greek capitalism and the governments that serve it or that have never done anything to break with it, by maintaining the train that can ensure some profits for the cronies - questions are also being asked about what has been done with the European

subsidies... -, but by betting on the source of profits that continues to be the safest and most advantageous, the one linked to the concrete builders and the road transport. Ecological concern only exists for the Mitsotakis government when it can allow private companies to make profits by building giant wind turbines everywhere, despite the opposition of local populations! It is obvious, and urgent: as far as transport is concerned, ecological, economical and safe public transport has yet to be decided and imposed by the population, especially the young people, who paid a high price in the Tèmbi tragedy.

A rising wave of anger

Indeed, there were many young people on the train that crashed. They were returning to Thessaloniki after a few days off at the end of February, the carnival (the busiest one takes place in Patras) and the "Clean Monday" holiday. And if very quickly, anger was expressed in a large part of the population - many people have experienced the multiple railway incidents of the last few years, in relation to which nothing was done by the administration - the youth made a real cry of revolt heard: "This is not a mistake, it is a crime."

Anger made up of an emotion felt by everyone in the face of the cruelty of the circumstances and the pain of the families: It was expressed in the physical figures formed in the streets or schools by the young people to write "Warn me when you get there", a phrase that was intended to be derisory, known to all young people and by which parents or relatives ask them to reassure them on their return from an evening out, but also at the end of their journey, which says a lot about the feeling of safety on the roads and on the rails... Anger too, because the young people understood perfectly well the basic reason for this accident. The slogan "Our dead, their profits" was not only written or chanted by the trade unions (like the UL of Piraeus) or political organizations, but also by many young students.

From Wednesday evening, the first demonstrations took place on the call of the radical and anti-capitalist left, with the first police violence in Athens. The same thing happened on Thursday, with more trade union participation, and in Athens, the transformation of a rally planned by artists in struggle into an angry demonstration towards the Athens train station. And on Friday there were rallies and demonstrations of school youth all over the country, while school occupations started. Obviously, Mitsotakis seems to fear - and rightly so - a real youth revolt, and the Greek bourgeoisie has been living since 2008 in fear of a repetition of such a movement that had destabilized it quite seriously. So, last night, during a silent rally in homage to the victims, with thousands of participants, the police charged again: proof if necessary that this government on the one hand has nothing to offer to young people but repression and regression of rights, but also that it knows to what extent its four years of government have been a permanent aggression against young people, with the police in the universities, the fundamentalist reaction of the Minister of Education, the hunt for refugees and in a general way the racism and the anti-youth policy.

In these conditions, the tragedy of Tèmbi is widely felt, with the large number of young victims, as a terrible proof of the contempt of this government and more generally of this economic system for the youth. The coming days will show if the mobilization intensifies, new dates have been given, and for its part, the railway union has extended the strike it launched on Thursday and Friday by 48 hours. And on Sunday, new demonstrations are planned, notably in response to a call from the railway workers.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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