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Riot in Syntagma Square

Alexis Daloumis

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On Friday, February 28 a demonstration happened in the center of Athens, Greece, which is considered to be the largest of all time. Estimates range between 700.000 and 1 million people. The epicenter was Syntagma Square, where is the Parliament, and from then on the crowd was stretching very far, in three main directions.

To the East, all the way to Evaggelismos metro station, to the North/North-West, all the way to Omonoia Station and to the South, all the way to Acropolis station. The trains were running every few minutes, all of them packed to the brim. Many people waiting in the platforms were even giving up the option to try to enter one of those trains that were overflowing with passengers, and made their way on foot, walking several kilometers in many instances. Syntagma and Panepistimio (the closest to Syntagma) metro stations were both closed on that day, by decision of the police. At the same time, similar demonstrations happened in 386 locations all around Greece and the world. In many Greek cities the locals reported that these were the largest demonstrations of all time as well.

It was the second anniversary of the deadly train crash in Tempi, which has since been labeled “the Tempi Crime”. What

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is explicitly claimed by this label is that this was a State crime, and there is a plethora of devastating evidence to back this claim. There are clear political responsibilities, and very possibly criminal responsibilities of high rank politicians, of different governments, since at least 2016.

What has been particularly damning about the current government, however, apart from the fact that they've been in power for the last six years, is that three weeks before the crush, rail unionists were specifically warning with certainty that a serious accident is imminent, only to be ignored. And on top of that, a mere eight days before the crush, the Minister of Transportation was reprimanding his colleagues of the Opposition in the Parliament for daring to imply that there are security issues in the Greek railways.

All of this had subsided as a topic of public discourse after some months. Members of the cabinet had even made arrogant statements implying that their election victory had "closed the subject". The relatives of the victims, however, were never gonna let this pass. Organized through their association they kept pushing the investigation, hiring their own people to that end. The evidence that kept coming into light had everything to do with their perseverance.

As said evidence was accumulating, in the recent weeks there was a breaking point of public anger, partly triggered by the release of some audio files that contained the last moments of some of the victims, who didn't die in the crash, but were then burned alive, due to (by all reasonable accounts) to the illegal cargo.

Given this culmination a first mass demo was called on many locations January 26. It was very large and heavy clashes took place between the protesters and the police in Athens. When another mass demo was called on the two year anniversary, and a general strike was also declared for that day, it was expected that its size would be immense.

By 11 am the whole center of the city was crammed with hundreds of thousands. Half an hour later the speeches from the stage and podium set right opposite the Parliament had concluded, with Maria Karistianou, the president of the Relatives' Association, giving the last poignant speech. By noon, as many people were trying to leave, but the crowd was still very dense, the (predictable) violence begun. Several hundred people had been preparing to attack the Parliament and were determined to have a bitter fight with the riot police, targeting it, as the personification of State violence. A large group of protesters with gas masks, hoods, balaclavas etc, had started amassing in front of the anarchist blocks. Some of them were even instructing some of the other demonstrators to open a corridor between them and the police.

The mixture of the crowds that fought the police on that day contained all sorts of people, albeit mostly youth. There was a couple of specific social groups, however, who were more distinct, organized, experienced and predetermined. Anarchists, as usual in Greek demonstrations, but also, as is the case in some particularly mass mobilizations like this one, a lot of football hooligans. A proliferation of certain equipment, some tactics seen, as well as some rhetoric and gestures, made that somewhat evident to the experienced eye. What ensued once the first charge was probably the most ferocious attack the Greek Parliament has sustained during a demonstration.