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Greece

Forty-nine years ago the Polytechnic massacre in Athens

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17 November 1973 is one of the key dates in contemporary Greek history and in the country's political and social struggles: following the countless acts of resistance to the fascist regime of the colonels' dictatorship (1967-1974), which was put in place at the instigation of the CIA, hundreds of students occupied the Polytechnic University of Athens (in the district of Exarcheia) and popularised their action by calling for the fall of the colonels. The colonels then launched the army against the students, the image of the tank smashing the gate of the university being known to all Greeks since that sinister date.

The result of the repression: at least 24 dead -figures of dozens of victims-, hundreds of injured and arrests. A year later, the dictatorship, increasingly destabilised, fell, sending the Greek army to occupy the island of Cyprus and causing it to suffer a terrible defeat at the hands of the Turkish army, which led to the division of the island into two zones separated by walls since then.

Since the end of the dictatorship, 17 November has been a day of mobilisation for schoolchildren, with the preceding days often preceded by commemorative initiatives (debates, concerts...) whose meaning has never been lost despite the years. And of course, every 17th of November, demonstrations take place all over the country commemorating the struggle of the Polytechnic men and women, and strongly condemning the United States (in Athens, the demonstration ends in front of the US embassy, which can sometimes be seen behind hundreds of MAT helmets), NATO and the anti-worker and anti-youth policies fought against by the slogan "Bread, education, freedom".

Three more reasons for a massive commemoration this year

Apart from the fact that in previous years the mobilisations were very limited in number by Covid and the various pretextual bans, there were three additional facts this year to make people want to go to the demonstrations or, at least for the families of the Athenian region, to go and lay a carnation in front of the monument and the entrance gate placed next to it to remind them of the barbarity of the junta:

– The large-scale policing carried out by the Mitsotakis government, reminding some of the climate of the dictatorship. The wiretapping scandal, which all evidence points to the Prime Minister, has taken on a dimension that would have forced any democratic government to resign. One has come to wonder whether he might not have actually succeeded in rigging the internal elections that a few years ago made him, the son of a politician whose action had at the time served to pave the way for the 1967 coup, the new leader of the right against the favourite Meïmarakis. Against these wiretaps, but more broadly against the use of violent repression as the only response to demands, popular anger is growing louder and louder;

– In the last few months, a dirty revisionist music can be heard: The Polytechnique revolt was a myth, on the one hand it was insignificant and had no effect on the fall of the junta, and on the other hand there were no deaths at Polytechnique, it was the left that invented all this... This propaganda, carried for almost 50 years by the fascists alone, has now found a relay in the governmental right, whether through the recycled fascist Minister of Development affirming that if there were any deaths, it was completely outside the Polytechnic, or through the Vice-Minister of Education, shamelessly repeating these lies. In the face of this offensive by the right-wing media, militant testimonies are of course decisive, like the one just given on the website of the anti-capitalist organisation Anametrissi by one of the best known and most respected militants of the revolutionary left, our comrade Yannis Felekis, tireless builder of

the Fourth International in Greece;

– Finally, the disastrous educational policy of the ultra-liberal government, of social selection and gifts to its private sector cronies, has been actively fought since 2019, and the impressive student mobilisations have often been mentioned here. But this year, the additional step in the repression constituted by the creation of a "university police" was welcomed as it should be: an unbearable provocation, which led and leads to numerous struggles to prevent the praetorians from entering the universities.

Very powerful demonstrations

One week after the very successful general strike of 9 November, the government was hoping for a "small" 17 November. For this purpose, as usual, it wanted to play on fear by deploying an army of MATs (almost 6000 in Athens) and by multiplying helicopters with searchlights. In Thessaloniki, the president of the university, who is happy that cops can patrol "his" university, had the university closed down, a sinister provocation against the memory of the Greek people's struggles and simply against democracy. The soothing speeches about 17 November as a "festival of all Greeks" (similarly, since the time of the dictator Metaxas, 1 May has been the "festival of flowers") and the whole repressive framework will have been useless: in the opinion of many, the demonstrations on 17 November were even more crowded than those of 9 November. In Athens, the police counted 20,000 demonstrators as for the 9th, but our comrades from NAR announced between 35 and 40,000. The student processions were incredibly massive, the trade union ones were often packed, as well as those of the revolutionary or reformist left. Not forgetting the processions of associations, like the one of the inhabitants of Exarcheia, mobilised against a vicious project of a metro station in the square of the same name... And important demonstrations took place elsewhere, like in Thessaloniki, Patras, in the university towns of Crete...

The slogans were of course against Mitsotakis' policy, "Bread, education, freedom" being more than ever a concentrate of social and democratic demands. Of course, the anti-imperialist slogans resounded very loudly, which is justified in the face of the gifts made to US imperialism which can now dispose of a maritime base in the north-east of Greece, in Alexandroupolis, not far from the entrance to the straits leading to the Black Sea. Denying Greece's involvement in a future inter-imperialist war, especially through these bases, is central. But we have to note a weakness of the anti-imperialist dimension of this 2022 demonstration, linked to the fact that on the issue of the ongoing dirty Russian war in Ukraine, apart from a few organisations with revolutionary Marxist positions, the "least bad" that we see in the Greek radical and revolutionary left is to denounce both US imperialism and the Putin invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, at a time when the Ukrainian people and territory are victims of a deluge of missiles aimed at punishing them for refusing to be a submissive people, at a time when peace, the object of many slogans, is threatened by this cynical Russian imperialist aggression in the heart of Europe, the most effective anti-imperialist slogan would have been something like "Putin, the best agent in the service of Nato, unconditionally withdraw your dirty paws from Ukraine"...

Anyway - we can see that the debates on the war in Ukraine are indispensable in the Greek left - the day of 17 November was a strong point of the mobilisation that is indispensable to chase away the right, a right that is visibly nostalgic for the Greece of the colonels, and against which we have to fight without nostalgia but by drawing the best from the heroic struggles of the Greek people. Bread, education, freedom!

Athens, 21 November 2022

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