

Under Attack

Greek medical workers face incredible odds to save their national healthcare



Greek protestors hold banners over the Parthenon during a two-day general strike called by unions to oppose deep government cuts to public benefits in order to satisfy foreign debt holders. Photo by Milos Bicanski/Getty Images

system and the lives of fellow protesters. **STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIA MISTILIS**



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ear gas billowed in

from both entrances of the first aid station where the riot police were chucking canisters. One can hit the station's tent wall, starting a fire. Inside, 20 medical volunteers, including registered nurses, doctors, and first aid personnel, struggled to protect and care for 30 to 40 patients with respiratory problems and trauma wounds. For over an

hour, they were all trapped: they could not see, they could not breathe.

Registered nurse Nikos Manias ran outside to appeal to the police to stop the tear gas attack, but they ignored him. One riot police officer came forward and threw a stun grenade at him. "I was standing on a bench. If I had been on the ground, it would have hit me," said Manias. Shortly after, another officer threw a rock at him. "I was on my knees, begging them to stop the tear gas attacks, but instead the police started throwing many stones at me."

No, this is not some Hollywood dramatization of riot police overreacting to an Occupy Wall Street protest. This was modern-day Athens, Greece, on June 29, 2011; the second day of a historic, two-day general strike that the Greek people staged to fight the second round of austerity measures their government passed in order to receive its second loan installment and balance their nation's budget on the backs of ordinary citizens.

Riot police unleashed a staggering 2,860 tear gas canisters and thousands of flash grenades to clear large crowds of people from central Athens in a five-hour assault which began at 2 p.m. Police typically use around 150 tear gas containers at Greek rallies.

While registered nurses, doctors, medics, and other healthcare professionals volunteering with the Occupy Wall Street movement have certainly faced their fair share of danger and police aggression while trying to treat people hurt during protests, marches, and rallies over the past several months, these American confrontations pale in comparison to the violence their counterparts in Greece have endured while trying to care for their own.

Since May 2010, the Greek people have staged a series of mass demonstrations, sectoral strikes, and 22 general strikes to fight against the draconian measures their government has enacted in order to appease foreign lenders who provided a €110 billion bailout for the debt-ridden nation. Deep cuts to public and private sector salaries, pensions, jobs, the national healthcare system, as well as a hike in the sales tax to 23 percent, have resulted in chaos,

high unemployment, and an effective dismantling of the public health system. Greece's trade unions and leftist political parties organized the initial opposition, but the protests have transformed into a broad-based people's movement, with millions of Greeks taking to the streets and actions ramping up since spring of this year.

In addition to participating in the demonstrations, Greek medical workers, including many registered nurses, doctors, and mental health professionals, volunteered from late May to late July to treat the injured through a medical station erected as part of a protest camp occupying Athens' Syntagma Square. Their medical expertise has been desperately needed. Greek police have been ruthless in response to protestors. The attack on the first aid station was part of a larger assault police launched against peaceful demonstrators in central Athens' Syntagma Square that day. Riot cops clouded the entire plaza in tear gas, beat protestors with batons, threw stun grenades, and even stoned people with marble rocks.

Incredibly, police did not consider the first aid station off limits to their violence.

"The riot police threw chunks of marble stones and chemical canisters at us. I fell down and then they came from behind and beat my legs with batons. I could not get up, I could not walk."



WHAT IS IT THAT GREEK REGISTERED NURSES and other medical workers are risking life and limb to defend? How did the situation get this bad?

Greek medical providers have been fighting a two-front battle against massive austerity measures imposed on Greece by what is being called a "troika" of foreign lenders: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Central Bank (ECB), and European Union (EU).

On one side, medical activists are trying to preserve Greece's National Health Service (NHS) in the face of debilitating cuts. On the other side, they find themselves under physical assault from the country's increasingly repressive police force.

Greece's Pasok government signed the first loan memorandum of €146 billion, about \$210 billion U.S. dollars, with the troika in May 2010, which included deep salary and pension cuts. The minimum



Clockwise from left: Protestors trying to flee from tear gas; Greeks from all walks of life gather in Athens' Syntagma Square; protestors strap on gas masks and goggles as riot police flood the area with tear gas.

wage was reduced from €700 to €550 (\$1,015 to \$797) per month, and €400 (\$580) per month for youth under 25 years old. Registered nurses' pay has been cut from €1060 Euro per month to €850 (from \$1,416 to \$1,136). In addition, 80,000 public-sector jobs were axed and the sales tax was raised from 19 to 23 percent. Since May 2010, unemployment has risen 40 percent, bringing the national

jobless rate in September 2011 to 18.4 percent for adults and 46.4 percent for youth.

In the area of healthcare, the latest round of austerity measures will slash the Greek National Health Service (NHS) budget by 40 percent. Established in 1983, the NHS provides free healthcare for Greek residents, running a national network of hospitals, clinics, and other primary care health centers. However, public healthcare in Greece is not universal. Only citizens and residents in full-time employment qualify for entirely free healthcare; those without public health insurance must opt for private insurance, or pay a nominal fee

of €5 at medical clinics, and all the costs of their public hospital treatment. The deepening economic crisis has seen a dramatic rise in public hospital and medical clinic admissions, as deep salary cuts and soaring unemployment force people out of private insurance. This has added a growing burden of care on the NHS, which is already under tremendous strain. According to a July statement by the Genoa Initiative of Hospitals, a medical professionals action group, the cuts are so severe they will effectively “dismantle the NHS.”

In new measures announced in July by health minister Andreas Loverdos, the government proposes to close 20 hospitals and 330 medical clinics, and merge 133 administration hospitals into 83 as a first step. More mergers and cuts are scheduled for the future. Hospital administration centers will be reduced from 92 to 22, and 13,000 hospital beds will close across Greece. Some 600 doctors and nurses' positions will be transferred or cut.

One doctor told the BBC that the “cuts are so severe to our public health system, that we will see deaths occurring as a direct result of their implementation.”

According to medical workers, the Greek public hospital system is already stretched to the breaking point. In March 2011, when the Union of Xanthi Doctors warned in writing that defective pegs used to close the arteries of umbilical cords were putting the lives of newborns at risk, the hospital's head administrator, Ati Bampalidis, threatened them with prosecution - even though doctors had photos to provide as evidence.

On June 25, a newborn nearly died because of a defective umbilical peg. The hospital's union said that the baby had lost 50 percent of its blood, but a “superhuman effort by doctors and nurses of the Hospital of Xanthi and the neonatal intensive care unit in Alexandropoulos miraculously managed to save the newborn baby's life.”

The quality and supply of medicines is also a major concern of medical personnel. “Pharmaceutical suppliers have stopped delivering drugs to our hospitals because the government has not been paying their bills, so we are using copies, which are much cheaper, but second- or third-rate quality compared with originals,” said registered nurse Melina Papas, from Heraklion, Crete. (Papas' name as well as the names of all registered nurses in this story, except for Manias, have been changed to protect their jobs; public-sector nurses are under government orders not to speak to the media or risk getting fired.)

Some of the hospitals slated for closure serve the most vulnerable Greeks. One such facility is the General Hospital of Patisia, located in downtown Athens. It is an area crowded with low-income Greek families, workers, and the unemployed, alongside communities of North African and Middle Eastern refugees living a marginal existence in neighborhoods fast becoming ghettoised.

At a July 7 meeting, Patisia General Hospital employees resolved to fight the closure with strike action, rallies, and the mobilization of all hospital workers and medical professionals from the ground up to demand that Greek health minister Andreas Loverdos repeal the new NHS measures.

In the week after the meeting, the hospital and doctors union staged a four-hour work stoppage and demonstration on July 14 outside the Health Ministry in central Athens. The hospital workers union took similar action July 20 followed by targeted actions outside the health ministry and participation in general strikes, which rolled on through the fall and into winter. “This attack is very strong, but doctors, nurses, and other staff have the power together to stop it,” said Chris Argyris of the Genoa Initiative.



“We are lacking the basics, such as needles, surgical gloves, sterile equipment, bed linens, even toilet paper! Some nurses have been buying supplies from pharmacies out of their own salaries. We are also dealing with major staff shortages, with one nurse being allocated to care for 35 or 40 patients.”

EVEN AFTER HIS FIRST RUN-IN with the riot police, Manias, the registered nurse, left the tent for a second time, accompanied by a doctor and two first aid volunteers, to convince the police to stop throwing tear gas at the first aid station. But the cops were relentless.

“The riot police threw chunks of marble stones and chemical canisters at us,” recounted Manias. “I fell down and then they came from behind and beat my legs with batons. I could not get up, I could not walk, because at the same time I was being hit with stones and we were engulfed in a cloud of chemicals.”

First aid volunteer Barbara Doukas also came out of the tent and asked the police for a corridor to evacuate the injured, but the police just escalated their attacks. Dr. Meletis Kiriakou, a pulmonary specialist who was treating patients with severe respiratory dysfunctions, then exited the tent with a megaphone, identified himself as a doctor and the tent as a medical station, and implored the riot police to “please respect the first aid station.”

The police responded by throwing more canisters of tear gas as well as stun grenades directly at the station entrances. “One grenade landed half a meter from the oxygen tank, another landed on the tent wall, causing a fire,” he said.

The chemical attacks escalated and medical personnel finally decided around 5:30 p.m. that they had to evacuate the first aid station since they felt that the lives of their patients would be at risk if they stayed one minute longer. The police had also shut down central Athens to traffic and denied ambulance access, even when directly requested by Dr. Vasilis Kafetsopoulos, a medical volunteer who phoned the Athens police chief from Syntagma Square several times that afternoon, urgently requesting ambulance access to transfer patients to the hospital. Kafetsopoulos' pleas fell on deaf ears, and medical volunteers had no choice but to carry patients by hand to the nearest subway station, where the Greek Red Cross has set up a triage room, and transport them to the hospital by Metro.

Even the evacuation, however, was conducted in the middle of a war zone. Medical workers could barely see and were struggling to breathe. As they carried the patients, with at least seven to 10 people with serious casualties, riot police started throwing rocks at the legs

From left: Greek riot police start launching tear gas outside of Parliament; first aid personnel carry an unconscious protestor on a stretcher into a makeshift medical station inside the subway system.



of the Greek Red Cross men bearing the stretchers. "The riot police who threw rocks at personnel bearing the stretcher of an injured person should be under psychiatric treatment," said Kiriakou. "This has nothing to do with politics. I have three children and grandchildren. How do you think I feel about their future in such a community? Even in the heat of battle during war, no one comes to attack medical personnel or the injured!"

But even the Metro station was no safe haven; police continued to throw chemical agents down the sub-

way stairwell. Despite these attacks, the medical volunteers and the Greek Red Cross treated 700 people and transferred 100 patients to the hospital by Metro. In the evening, about 20 nurses and 20 doctors of all ages arrived to help out, bringing medications. Together, they worked to care for the injured until the last train departed Syntagma Square at midnight.

When the nurses and doctors returned to the square the next morning, they found the first aid station destroyed. "We do not let anyone force us to abandon our medical center," said Kiriakou, "so we got it up and running again straight away, for the sake of our dignity, to breathe again, and to dream again for the future of our children."

Police violence at public rallies is not an unusual occurrence in Greece. At previous demonstrations in February, May, and early June, riot police attacked demonstrators, bystanders, and journalists with batons, tear gas, and stun grenades.

Amnesty International has issued multiple statements condemning the violent conduct of Greek police in recent years. "Amnesty

International, on various occasions, has raised concerns over repeated and credible allegations of excessive use of force by the police and prevailing impunity in the context of police ill-treatment," read one statement in response to police actions on June 15. "The organization has therefore called for the establishment of an independent and effective police complaints mechanism to investigate all allegations of human rights violations by the police. Moreover, Amnesty International reiterates its call to the Greek authorities to address the longstanding systemic problems of policing and the failure of law enforcement officials to comply with international human rights standards."

Fortunately, there were no fatalities, which observers attribute to the organization of the Syntagma Square first aid station volunteers and the Athens Metro for inviting the Greek Red Cross to set up a medical room inside Syntagma Square station.

Though first responder medical care is clearly desperately needed during these Greek protests, on July 31, police evicted the entire Syntagma Square camp in a 4 a.m. raid, confiscating tents and equipment, including the first aid station. The Ministry of Justice followed this up with an announcement on Aug. 10 that plastic bullets, water cannons, and dogs will be introduced to policing future demonstrations. In the wake of these proposed measures, Greek medical personnel now fear that protestors will be at risk of serious injury or even death. Sir Hugh Orde, who deployed plastic bullets and water cannons against protestors when he was chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, warned against the use of plastic or rubber bullets in an Aug. 9 article in *The Guardian*. Police are supposed to fire at a person's legs, but 17 people, eight of them children, have been killed since 1969 with rubber or plastic bullets.

But the chemical gas, clubs, and rocks have not driven demonstrators off the streets or intimidated the population. The Greek people have continued to protest through fall and into winter, staging the latest general strike on Dec. 1.

Manias, Kiriakou, and other nurses, doctors, first aid, and Red Cross personnel met again at Syntagma Square on Aug. 24, resolving to reestablish the first aid station for the fall. They have consistently been providing medical care at demonstrations throughout the fall and into winter, a very difficult task, given that tents and equipment are not allowed since the eviction of the Syntagma Square protest camp in July.

Meanwhile, nursing staff working in Greece's NHS are dealing with a rapidly worsening situation as severe budget cuts and staff shortages take effect. Registered nurse Maria Papadopoulos, who works at a public hospital in central Athens, said that "drastic shortages of equipment and supplies are commonplace now. We are lacking the basics, such as needles, surgical gloves, sterile equipment, bed linens, even toilet paper! Some nurses have been buying supplies from pharmacies out of their own salaries. We are also dealing with major staff shortages, with one nurse being allocated to care for 35 or 40 patients. We are united in our view that public healthcare in Greece should not fall to third-world standards and so we are doing our best to prevail."

The campaign to save the NHS continues. "This attack is very high, but doctors, nurses, and other staff have it within our power together to stop it," said Chris Argyris of the Genoa Initiative of Hospitals. "Every hospital and clinic will create strike committees and take the initiative to activate the base and organize each hospital to directly challenge the plans of the ministry." ■

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