

# Fires in Greece: the politics of natural disasters

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**The government has persistently allowed private interests in construction, industry and tourism to be prioritised over serious ecological and safety concerns.**

It's difficult to discuss natural disasters, even more so in the case where dozens of human lives have been lost in the most horrific way.

The circumstances that made possible were the extraordinary strong wind, the high temperature, and the site itself. This is a summer resort for citizens of the capital, who are of average to low income, as those with higher incomes invest in land in more prestigious areas. In July, the resort is full of people who still work but modify their schedule for a quick trip to the coast, which is just an hour away from Athens.

## Context of arsons

It is indeed sad to go through the details of the destruction. But is necessary to explain the context to understand the degree of importance of the event. It is common for fires to break out during the Greek summer. There are good reasons for the public to blames someone else, rather than a careless tourist who threw a cigarette butt still alight or some group of naïve teenagers who wanted to roast marshmallows in a field.

Forrest fires in Greece are usually regarded as acts of arson as for decades they have been closely connected to the urban expansion plans of property speculators. The geography of Greece, which is mainly mountainous or semi-mountainous and usually forested, is a difficult terrain for the urban expansion plans of property speculators who target mountainous regions for mining or for the construction of huge tourist facilities. Tourism is the most profitable industry in Greece, and indicators prove it to be more and more profitable with record arrivals during the last two years. With money making the world go round, the past and present governments have always kept the door open for this sort of investment, and as far as construction investment is concerned, the bigger it is, the more profitable.

There is also the private interest of the Greek petit-bourgeoisie who for decades is building where it is illegal as it searches for a calm and remote place. It is done in the knowledge, that if necessary, the rules will be bent and that the SYRIZA-ANEL government has made the legislation a lot more lenient.

## Government Responsibility

So there is motive, but the state likes to claim that it defends the public from devious individuals, but it is there to protect, first and foremost, the profits of the petit bourgeoisie. The Greek state can't hide from the total lack of social care. Initially there was the argument that the public debt, brought in by the IMF, was an attack on public expenditure with its privatization and everything that the word austerity usually includes. Almost ten years later, this argument is worn out. The Greek PM

Alexis Tsipras boasts that after all the sacrifice, a closure will be reached with a slow-paced exit from the financial control and the possible departure from IMF. Though blood is already on the government's hands, it comes from the disastrous policies they introduced along with the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, locking the state into an obligatory GDP surplus. Furthermore, the Greek State's imperialist views comply with the NATO strategy in the region, making it a country of high importance and that also means high military expenditure. As a matter of fact, Greece is the second state in percentage of GDP devoted to military expenditures amongst the NATO countries. Military expenditure means aeroplanes, tanks and helicopters, thus no fire extinguishing planes. Natural disasters definite, human response isn't.

### **Who is the enemy?**

The solidarity response was astonishing. Volunteers of all ages, but especially young people showed up, while at the same time the hospitals all over Athens saw long queues of people answering the call for blood donors. The amount of funds and resources collected is encouraging as well. The most interesting is the demographics of this response. Egyptian workers, Kurdish organisations, Syrian and Iraqi refugees, all helped in an active way, either by taking part in various rescue attempts or by providing for the ones in need. Even Roma people appeared, even if during the last month in the region they are under pressure from the police and the far right. The state of Macedonia offered 100.000 euros, while in Turkey first in the twitter trends is the hashtag [#Geçmi?OlsunKom?u](#) (May everything pass to Neighbour).

### **It is a class issue**

Fire casualties are always a class issue. Just a bit more than a year from Grenfell Tower incident, the British society has been reminded of this in a tragic manner. In the Greek case, it is not so different. Arson is committed for the interest of private investment. State fire prevention policy is non-existing, something sadly proven in previous cases of fires and flooding that have led to loss of life and destruction of property. The only part of the society affected are workers, the ones driven by the sole motive of surviving, and the helpless. The last days have brought into surface horrific stories. If there is an alternative, it is somewhere between the migrants who stood up and lent a hand to a society that treated them as aliens for decades, and the section of the left that points at those who are responsible instead of making vain cries for state support and better public services.

### **ANTARSYA statement on the wildfires in Attica, Greece**

The "Asymmetric Threat" [1] for the people and the environment is capitalist development - as shown by disastrous fires

### **Compensation of victims and protection of the affected areas from the interests of arsonists**

The only "asymmetric threat" responsible for the devastating fires in East Attica, Corinthia and Fthiotida, Chania, Evros is the destructive development in favour of speculation of capitalization. Profits come before people and the natural environment.

Society was hit by the consequences of catastrophic fires with minimal help by the state apparatus; the fire brigade is disintegrated and under-resourced while its staff are making heroic efforts, the forest service is dissolved and there has been a lack of preventive measures. Just a few months ago, another area in Attica was hit by devastating floods which left dozens of people dead.

The country is second in military spending amongst NATO members, but it does not have the basic infrastructure to deal with the fires and flooding caused by the construction contractors' impunity. The SYRIZA-ANEL government and the Attica regional authorities are hiding behind tedious words

about the severity of the weather. They followed the same tactics followed for decades by the previous governments of Nea Dimokratia and PASOK, which left untouched the arsonists' interests to speculate on destruction. They set no penalty for the speculation of the earth, the blockage of the natural water flows, the destruction of the coastline – all that led to dozens of people not having an easy route of escape, with the known tragic consequences.

ANTARSYA expresses condolences to the victims' relatives and its solidarity with those who have experienced tragic moments, having been affected by the devastating fires. It calls for the mobilisation of the popular movement to support the region in an effort to overcome the disaster on the grounds of solidarity.

Immediate measures are needed:

- To compensate all the victims of the disaster, immediately and altogether, in order to empower them to protect themselves against the various interests which are targeting the area and their property.
- To prevent land use in burned areas, protecting the area from business and construction contractors' interests.
- To reorganise fire protection. Mass recruitment for the fire brigade. Renewal of equipment, especially vehicles. Reorganisation of the Forest Service.
- Take immediate flood protection measures to prevent new victims from flooding in winter.
- Expenditures on fire protection and social needs, not for bloody public surpluses and the army – cancellation of the public debt!

It takes decisiveness and struggle to counter the policy that removes resources from social needs, such as fire protection, in order to repay the public debt, fulfil the memoranda obligations, finance the bloody public surpluses, and fund army expenditures and NATO.

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## P.S.

Socialist Resistance

<http://socialistresistance.org/fires-in-greece-the-politics-of-natural-disasters/12831>

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## Footnotes

[1] "Asymmetric threat" is an expression used only under serious military circumstances and indicates that state defence mechanisms are to be on high alert. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras used the phrase on 24<sup>th</sup> July in relation to the fires.