

Greek students protest against PASOK government

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For the past two months, thousands of school students throughout Greece have carried out occupations, roadblocks and demonstrations against the PASOK government's proposals for "improving the efficiency and effectiveness" of education.

The social democratic government's reforms include changes to the procedures for university entrance. Replacing the existing system of examinations with continuous assessment will make it even more difficult to gain a place at university.

These changes come on top of other deeply unpopular measures announced last year, requiring new examinations for graduates who want to become teachers and tests of competency every five years for the teaching profession. Many people who have waited years to get a job in the public school system are now required to take the new exam. They believe that their university degrees should be the only qualification necessary.

The main teaching union has held 24-hour strikes, during which there were running battles with the police. Centres where the new examinations are being taken have been targeted for protest.

Before Christmas more than half the country's secondary schools were occupied. At least 600 of these remain under occupation. Last Monday, students blocked roads in Athens, the northern city of Thessaloniki, and Larissa, in central Greece.

At the panhellenic demonstrations on January 15, students from as far south as the island of Crete and as far north as the Turkish border took part. In Athens, Greece's capital, more than 20,000 students marched, chanting, "The law will never pass". Firebombs and stones were hurled at riot police and government buildings. Tear gas was used to disperse the students. In Thessaloniki, journalists were attacked and firebombs

were thrown at the main courthouse.

Students say they will march on the Greek parliament as a last ditch effort to get the government to drop the legislation. Gavrilos, from the Athens Student Coordinating Committee, outlined the students' demands on BBC Radio 4's "Turning World". "We want education not examinations. More money for education. A stop to police violence. We want democracy."

On the same programme a professor of modern Greek history at the London School of Economics explained, "There is every reason for the public school students to be frustrated. There is enormous pressure to succeed. One third of students have to get into university and are worried because of rising unemployment. I can perfectly understand why 15-, 16- and 17-year-old students are concerned."

Compulsory education in Greece--with six years at elementary school and three years at secondary school--is among the shortest in the European Union. State spending on health and education combined, at about 9 percent of GDP, is the lowest in Europe. The vast majority of schools lack the most basic facilities: books, libraries and computers. Most are forced to operate on alternate morning-afternoon rotas because they do not have enough classrooms.

There is enormous dissatisfaction with the quality of education in schools, technical colleges and universities, at all levels of society. As Greek students in Britain explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "There is such a shortage of university education that there are four students chasing every place. One in four graduates in Greece today have been trained abroad. Schooling is so poor that every one who wants to get into university pays for extra tuition. Some students don't even bother to go to school, but rely solely on the

private tuition. It's a major industry now."

One Greek lecturer at Manchester University told the WSWS, "The present system discriminates against the poorest who cannot afford the extra tuition or private schools. Thirty years ago, you never sent your kids to private school. Now, you have to if you want your kids to get a decent education. Something has got to be done, but no one believes that the government has got it right. The Conservative Party is against it, the Communist Party is against it and even people within PASOK are against it."

The pressure to get into university is all the higher because Greece has the second lowest income per head in the EU. Unemployment has risen continuously since 1990 and was more than 10 percent in 1997. This average masks very worrying developments. More than 30 percent of the under 25 year olds are out of work and more than 40 percent of young women cannot get jobs. Closures in "one company" towns have created job deserts, where unemployment is more than 50 percent.

Cut off from its natural trading partners in southeast Europe as a result of the Cold War, Greece's economic development was very distorted. It was forced to rely on services, tourism, shipping and remittances from emigrants working abroad, principally in Germany. Its entry into the EU led to the decline of its very small industrial sector (14 percent of GDP). Corporations in the low-tech industries set up in the 1950s and 1960s have switched to even lower wage economies in southeast Europe.

What lies behind these and other reforms is Greece's wholesale restructuring of state-owned enterprises and public services, which constitute more than 60 percent of GDP, in order to meet the criteria for entry into the European single currency in January 2001.

The PASOK government has tightened income policy, cut welfare benefits and started the sale of state assets. It insists that it will not change its plans. At the end of last year, tens of thousands of public sector workers took part in strikes and demonstrations against the attacks.

A major crisis is developing. Such is the ferocity of this movement that the president, Costas Stephanopoulos, has broken his silence to urge a rethinking of the reforms in order to end the "children's revolution".



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