

Greece: Mass demonstrations protest assault on public education

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Students and academic staff in Greece have mounted demonstrations, rallies and occupations of universities for the past four months against plans by the New Democracy government of Constantine Karamanlis to break up the state system of higher education and introduce private universities.

The struggle by students to defend basic education rights has won support from wide sections of the working class.

On June 1, university lecturers launched an indefinite strike against the proposals and students began protests outside the education ministry. Two days later, students organised sit-ins at nearly 400 university departments and 60 technical colleges nationwide.

On June 8, 20,000 students participated in the largest student march for 20 years in the centre of Athens. The demonstration was brutally attacked by police. An estimated 10,000 students demonstrated in Salonika.

The next day, 350 of Greece's 456 faculties were under occupation by students, with more than 100,000 students participating in rallies and protests. On June 15, a further demonstration of several thousand students and their supporters was staged outside the parliament building.

The demonstrations culminated in a nationwide protest on June 22, joined by hundreds of thousands of students and workers in both the public and private sectors. Workers at subway, trolley and suburban rail lines held short work stoppages. Flights by state carrier Olympic Airlines were hit.

On June 27, students and political groups demonstrated outside a hotel in Lagonissi, a resort town 40 kilometres south of Athens, where Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) education ministers were holding a two-day conference on higher education.

An estimated 2,000 police officers were mobilised to seal off access to the hotel and close a section of the road to Lagonissi. When 500 people requested access to the hotel's entrance to hand in a declaration, the police dispersed the demonstration with tear gas. Later that day, police in central Athens also used tear gas to disperse 10,000 students who marched to the Education Ministry.

By June 27, students had staged sit-ins at more than 450 faculties. Two days later, students ended the protests for the half-term holidays, but pledged to resume in September.

The government's plans

Under proposals made by Education Minister Marietta Yannakou, the government plans to create the country's first private universities and change the way students and educators at public institutions are assessed.

The measures include the imposition of fixed time periods for completing a degree, penalising those who cannot complete their course for health or personal reasons. Other attacks being considered are the withdrawal of free textbooks and subsidised canteens.

The creation of private universities requires changing the Greek constitution, which only recognises public universities. Article 16 of the 1975 Constitution states that tertiary education is exclusively "public and free of charge".

Further plans include cutting higher education expenditure and abolishing the university asylum law, which bans police from entering university grounds unless invited by university officials. The law was introduced following the overthrow of the military dictatorship in 1974. In November 1973 students, barricaded in the Athens Polytechnic, demonstrated against the junta led by the dictator George

Papadopoulos. Within days, the government sent the army in to put down the growing protests, killing 24 people outside the Athens Polytechnic.

Prime Minister Karamanlis has announced further negotiations and a “dialogue” with students, while insisting the overall policy would remain. The leader of the opposition Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), George Papandreou, said in the parliamentary debate that the party supported changing the constitution, claiming that this was necessary because “failure to regulate private units leads to private-sector lawlessness”.

Behind the attacks on public education is a big business agenda. On assuming power in March 2004, Karamanlis declared: “The world will experience a country in Europe whose policies are directed at making it attractive for foreign capital and which is prepared to privatise public enterprises.”

Karamanlis recently told an EU summit in Brussels: “We must make Greek universities competitive, we must improve their quality and we must proceed with the necessary reforms.”

The influential *Kathimerini* newspaper commented: “Year after year Greece has ranked at the bottom of the OECD table in foreign direct investment, a failure that should debunk enduring myths and disclose the structural problems dogging the local economy.”

Stating that Britain and the US currently win the largest share of foreign investment, the article continued: “In fact, private corporations seem to prefer countries that take steps to trim the cost of red tape and minimise other obstacles and which have straightforward regulations... In fact Greece’s performance is reminiscent of Third World countries, pulling just \$600 million in direct foreign investment a year.”

It called on the government to discontinue “bureaucratic procedures” and concluded “most importantly, there is need for a structural overhaul of the state apparatus and the education system. Otherwise, Greece will remain a perennial laggard.”

Another article by Stamos Zoulas published on June 28, pointed out that the public education measures were fundamental to the government’s overall pro-business agenda. “The government does not have the luxury to steer a path between the desirable and the possible,” he wrote. “The government can either (figuratively)

launch an all-out assault against protesters or abandon its entire reform package.”

The plans are part of a global offensive of capital to slash public spending in order to increase profit levels. Universities in all countries are increasingly reliant upon private student fees, corporate sponsorship and business research partnerships.

The OECD has called on the government to accelerate its reform programme. Speaking as students protested outside the June 27 conference, OECD secretary general Angel Gurría said reform of the education system in Greece was critical. Another priority was an overhaul of the pensions system, he added.

The government has repeatedly asserted that its education proposals are only opposed by “minorities who are reacting to the modernisation of the Greek university”. The support won by the demonstrations of students and academic staff gives the lie to this claim. A recent survey conducted for *Kathimerini* and Skai radio and TV showed that 50 percent of people opposed the government’s education plans. This rose to 74 percent among those aged between 18 and 24.



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