

Greek parliament overturns right to free, universal education

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On Thursday the Greek parliament voted to pass legislation, codenamed the Athena Plan, aimed at the destruction of free, state-provided higher education. The law was rammed through in flagrant violation of the Greek constitution, which does not allow for the abolition of universities.

The law was passed with 148 parliamentary deputies voting in favour with 125 against. The deputies of the Democratic Left, the smallest party in the ruling three-party coalition which also comprises the conservative New Democracy and social democratic PASOK, voted against the measures. This was entirely on the basis that support for it would threaten their ability to operate as a “left” fig leaf for the governments’ austerity strategy.

Athena results in the immediate closure of four universities (ten percent of the remaining 40). These are the University of Central Greece, the University of Western Greece, the International Hellenic University and the University of Western Macedonia.

Some 20 percent of Greece’s technical institutions will also be abolished, with a number merged to establish privatized colleges. Currently there are a total of 534 departments, comprising 289 university departments and 245 technical college departments. A total of 129 university (AEI) and technical college (TEI) departments will be closed immediately and a further 26 other departments gradually phased out.

Since the Athena Plan—cynically named after the Greek goddess of wisdom and knowledge—was first announced in January, tens of thousands of students and young people have protested in an attempt to prevent its passage.

As it passed, more than 5,000 students, including some from faculties in Patras and other cities, protested outside the parliament in Athens. Gathering in front of Athens University, the protest marched to the main

Syntagma Square via Omonia Square and Stadiou Street. Despite a heavy police presence and the use of tear gas in an attempt to disperse the protesters, many students remained in the area. Students set fire to a flag of the European Union to protest the austerity programme being carried out at its behest.

One of the protesters stressed to PressTV the dictatorial nature of the new law, stating, “Today they passed an unprecedented bill that will allow the education minister to legislate restrictions and spending cuts, without the need for parliamentary voting. His signature alone will suffice to that effect. But we will not accept that. They are running our future and they will find us against them.”

Other protests were held the same day in Greece’s second city, Thessaloniki, in which students from the city of Serres also participated. A demonstration was also held in Larissa, the capital and biggest city of the Thessaly region.

The student protests have been fuelled by systemic youth unemployment, which now stands at almost 60 percent. Many students have cited the deaths of two university students in Larissa, from carbon monoxide poisoning in early March, as being symbolic of the terrible conditions they face. The two were trying to heat their dwelling with a makeshift heating stove when they gradually passed out. Three other students in the house were hospitalised, with two of them close to death and in a coma.

Of 63 towns nationwide, Athena will leave 12 without any higher education institution, department or school. It is estimated that more than 20,000 students will have to abandon their studies or move to another town. Teaching staff and department employees will be fired.

As courses are slashed to the bone, with only those

deemed profitable able to survive, the cuts will have a grave impact on graduates wishing to enter higher education. It is estimated that this academic year alone the number of successful applicants is down from 77,000 in the previous academic year to 55,000.

An example is seen at the University of Western Macedonia, which will be abolished as a self-governing institution. Five of its six departments (four of which are in the town of Florina, and two in Kozani) will come under the Aristotelian University in Thessaloniki and the University of Macedonia, while one department will be abolished.

The cuts at the Technological Educational Institute of Western Macedonia are far deeper under the final Athena plan than originally proposed: only nine out of the 20 departments remain, as opposed to the 13 originally planned.

In pushing through Athena, the Greek ruling elite is tearing up the educational system and laying the basis for a private-sector takeover of education, in flagrant violation of the Greek constitution.

The right to free education was first enshrined in the constitution following the fall of the military Junta in 1974. In 1975 Article 16 became part of the constitution and stated, "All Greeks are entitled to free education on all levels at State educational institutions". It adds, "Education at university level shall be provided exclusively by institutions which are fully self-governed public law legal persons."

Point 16:8 of the constitution states, "The establishment of university level institutions by private persons is prohibited". Whilst the constitution permits, the "Merging or splitting of university level institutions," it does not allow for their abolition, as the Athena plan dictates.

Under Athena, it will become easier for private firms to invest in faculties, and appoint the personnel of their choosing, thus bringing private management into education provision. Institutions will be required to seek private sponsorship and connect their educational programmes more and more to the demands of the market. Athena's focus is to promote those faculties specialising on economics and business, while other departments will be allowed to go to the wall.

The Athena plan is the culmination of a massive onslaught against state education, demanded by the European Union, European Central Bank and

International Monetary Fund under the terms of Greece's 240 billion euro loans. Last August, Education Minister Constantinos Arvanitopoulos said, "It is impossible for a country with a population of 11 million people to afford about 40 universities when other countries, such as Israel, have just seven or eight."

In the last several years, academics have suffered salaries cuts of more than 50 percent, with the budgets of many institutions also slashed by more than half. School teachers have also recently demonstrated alongside academics and pupils in their thousands against cuts at primary and secondary school level.

Such has been the level of cuts to the education budget that much of the schooling infrastructure has been destroyed. Over the winter months hundreds of schools nationwide were forced to try to function without any heating oil, computers and insufficient textbooks.



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