Greek students face prosecution for protests

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In April, 21 Greek students will be tried for participating in a 2011 school occupation. They face prison sentences of up to six months. Their prosecution is aimed at criminalizing anyone who protests against cuts in education, as austerity measures are intensified.

In December 2011, 13 students organised an occupation at their technical lyceum in Loutraki, a small coastal town in southern Greece. “Our school was threatened with decay and we decided to defend ourselves and demand our rights,” explained one of the participants.

The school occupation in Loutraki was part of a larger strike wave that included about 800 schools in October 2011. A year later, numerous schools were again occupied. In Volos, a port city in the western Greek region of Magnisia, a majority of students voted for an occupation of their lyceum. Several schools closed their doors to protest against the shortage of teachers, lack of building maintenance and impending cuts brought about by merging some schools.

Neither in Loutraki nor in Volos were the problems facing the schools rectified. On the contrary, the cuts were intensified. In August 2013, the parents of students at the technical lyceum in Loutraki, where the strike took place in 2011, wrote a letter of protest against further cuts planned by the Ministry of Education. Throughout Greece, some 52 fields of study are to be closed in vocational grammar schools.

The indictment faced by the students is based on a law that was enacted in March 2000 under the social democratic PASOK government of Costas Simitis. It allows for the criminal prosecution of those “who interfere with or disrupt the smooth running of state schools.” The students are not accused of causing any damage at their schools, but of merely carrying out the school occupation.

The law itself was a political response to a protest movement of school students in 1998-1999. At the time, thousands of young people and teachers opposed the reforms of education minister Gerasimos Arsenis (PASOK) with school occupations and demonstrations. The so-called “Arsenis law” made high school graduation and access to university far harder.

There is a long tradition of school occupations in Greece. Since the end of the military dictatorship in the 1970s, students have frequently occupied their educational institutions in protest. In 1973, when students at Athens Polytechnic University protested against the junta, they faced a bloody massacre. After the fall of the colonels’ regime, students established what is referred to as “academic asylum” to protect research and education and prevent the police and military from accessing university property. Occupations occurred repeatedly in subsequent years.

However, under conditions in which class conflict is intensifying, the ruling class is determined to put an end to such forms of protest. The PASOK government of George Papandreou abolished the academic asylum provisions in August 2011. On December 17, 2011, for the first time since the end of the military dictatorship, the police carried out a raid on university property. Now this offensive is being extended to school occupations, with the aim of forestalling future protests

Ongoing cuts to education have led to a resurgence of popular opposition at Greek schools. In the summer, teachers and school guards went on strike. In the autumn, students nationwide took solidarity action with them and occupied 120 schools. The state responded with repression. The teachers’ strike was put under martial law and terminated with the help of the unions. The police were deployed against children.

The police acted particularly harshly at a technical secondary school in Lamia in October. After the students refused a police order to end their strike, officers ended the occupation on the orders of the state attorney and arrested 20 students.

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In November 2013, the government threatened to impose martial law against striking university employees. In February 2014, police officers visited several schools in Athens and questioned students who had participated in the school strikes in October. At a police station, five students were questioned about their personal political views and those of their parents and teachers.

The government's actions are aimed at intimidating the population under conditions in which austerity measures have already had a devastating impact and further cuts are under preparation. This winter, there was a shortage of heating oil in about 50 schools in northern Greece. According to a study published in the *Eleftherotypia* newspaper 60 percent out of a total of 16,000 Greek families and 32,358 school children in 2012 lacked, on occasion, sufficient food. Twenty-three percent of these children were malnourished. Since 2010 teaching staff has been cut by about 25 percent. New teachers today only earn €650-700 a month. Due to measures imposed by international lenders, as of March 22 a further 400 teachers and 1,600 school guards will face unemployment.

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