

Students occupy hundreds of schools throughout Greece

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Students occupied nearly six hundred high schools throughout Greece last Monday in protest against the New Lyceum legislation voted in by Greece's parliament last year, which has radically overhauled the process of school and university entrance examinations. Chronic underfunding as well as a lack of teaching staff in many schools was also a factor in prompting the occupations.

Since the end of the military dictatorship in the 1970s, students have frequently occupied their educational institutions in protest. The occupations were reportedly prompted by a Facebook event page titled "Panhellenic Occupation, Say No to The New System," which was set up by a user going by the name of Yiannis Georgiou.

In addition to introducing stricter grading requirements for passing from one class to the next, the New Lyceum legislation has introduced a centrally compiled Topics Bank for each subject. According to the new rules, half of all exam questions must be sourced from the Topics Bank with the rest set by individual teachers. According to a May article in *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton* (*Ef.Syn.*) this measure will force teachers to adapt their teaching to suit the types of questions prescribed by the Topics Bank, which will downgrade their role to teaching techniques for memorising information. The Topics Bank is a stepping stone towards the governments' gradual attempts to "assess teachers and schools based on student performance."

Public spending on education in Greece makes up 2.5 percent of GDP, which is well below the European Union (EU) average of 5 percent. This is a result of the austerity measures implemented by successive governments since 2010 at the behest of the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary

Fund—collectively known as the troika. Spending on education fell by 35.5 percent between 2009 and 2014 and it is predicted that spending will fall below 2 percent of GDP by 2018.

In this context, the New Lyceum legislation and Topics Bank measures are a means of pitting students and schools against one another as they compete over ever scarcer resources.

It will boost the private educational sector, namely the plethora of cramming schools known as *frontistiria*. The *frontistiria* have historically filled the gap left by the chronic underfunding of the Greek educational system, with households already spending a total of €1 billion year on *frontistiria* or private tuition. With families struggling to make ends meet, extra out-of-pocket expenses on education mean that the prospects of students from economically disadvantaged families will suffer.

Education Minister Andreas Loverdos' response to the occupations was a threat to punish those taking part by invoking a presidential decree which states that in any school occupation that exceeds three days, lost hours will be made up by holding lessons during weekends, public holidays, the breaks during Christmas and Easter and by cutting the number of school outings. The decree was signed by President of the Republic Karolos Papoulias in December 2013, in response to a wave of school occupations in October that year.

Loverdos also worked with Manolis Sfakianakis, head of the Greek police's Electronic Crime Unit, and with Supreme Court Prosecutor Efterpi Koutzamani in order to discover the identity of the person who created the page on Facebook. Loverdos said, "If the page has been set up by a student then that's fine. However, if that person is of a different age and wants to determine the way schools operate then that's a problem."

The Facebook page was taken off the social networking site on Wednesday, but was back up the next day.

Koutzamani sent out a circular on Tuesday to all local prosecutors in Greece, requesting that they step in to restore order in schools. She cited a circular sent out in 2009 by her predecessor, Ioannis Tentes, in which he directed prosecutors that in cases of “extreme criminal” behaviour during occupations, the parents of perpetrators should be investigated to establish grounds for prosecution based on negligent supervision.

The state’s response to the occupations is an expression of the authoritarian measures successive governments have taken to crush opposition against the austerity measures they have implemented at the behest of the troika. In February this year police raided a series of schools in Athens and Pireaus, with students taken in for questioning in relation to the school occupations last October.

The response of the pseudo-left SYRIZA party (Coalition of the Radical Left) to the occupations came via its youth wing, SYRIZA Youth, which released a statement Wednesday, two days after the occupations began, vaguely stating that “students were fighting against the school being prepared for them and are striving for a different type of school.”

This prompted Loverdos to accuse SYRIZA of being behind the occupations. According to online financial journal *capital.gr*, SYRIZA’s leadership was “furious” about Loverdos’ allegations “given that they were expecting that their discrete and low key response to this issue would have been understood.”

President of the High School Teacher’s Union (OLME) Themis Kotsifakis acted along the same lines, when in an interview to Vima FM he distanced himself from the protesting students. Kotsifakis, who stood as a SYRIZA candidate in this year’s European elections, stated, “I don’t want to get into the process of saying ‘kids occupy your schools’ or ‘kids don’t occupy your schools’.”

The pseudo-left and the trade union bureaucracy, through limited 24-hour strikes, have been instrumental in winding down opposition to wave after wave of savage austerity measures imposed since 2010. Militant strikes that directly threaten government policy have been wound down and isolated, even as the government employed civil mobilisation orders to break them.

Placing striking workers under martial law and ordering them back to work, civil mobilisation orders have been used by successive governments since 2009. In May 2013 civil mobilisation orders were issued to striking high school teachers after their action was betrayed by OLME. They were most recently used to break a strike by Public Power Corporation (PPC) workers in July.



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