

Interview with a teacher from Greece: “Teachers have the same problems worldwide”

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The teachers' strikes and demonstrations that began in West Virginia in the United States have spread to other states including Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona. With the March for Our Lives, hundreds of thousands of school and university students have expressed opposition to mass violence. All over the world, teachers, workers and young people are following this rebellion with sympathy.

In Frankfurt am Main, we spoke with Evangelos, a natural history and physics teacher at junior high school, who works in Greece and Germany. He expressed his solidarity with the teachers in the USA and reported on a teachers' strike in Greece.

Evangelos: I hope that the struggles of American teachers are expanding and that they are successful. Clearly, the teachers have touched a sore point, because the media is trying to keep completely silent about the strikes. I only heard about them from the WWS.

In fact, it does not surprise me that a global movement now comes from the US. The social inequality there is just enormous. In other countries, however, a strong pressure is also felt. In Greece too, teachers recently went on strike.

Marianne Arens: Can you tell us about the teachers' strike in Greece?

Evangelos: Teachers stopped work for a full day in early March. There were rallies in Athens and Thessaloniki. About a thousand teachers demonstrated in front of the Education Ministry in Maroussi in northern Athens and demanded admission. They wanted to talk to Kostas Gavroglu, the Syriza minister who now heads the Ministry of Education, Research and Religion. The police responded by using tear gas against the teachers. Later, they also used batons to

disperse the crowd.

The Greek teachers are striking because they have virtually no chance of ever being hired permanently. Anyone not hired by the Greek state as a civil servant receives only a limited contract for a few months. After the big holidays, teachers have to reapply each time. If you are lucky you are reinstated, but otherwise you will be unemployed.

Some can only work and earn money seven months a year. Many are hired only with a half-time contract, and payment is halved accordingly. If a teacher would earn 1,100 euros a month full-time, he only earns 550 euros for a half-time job. These are real poverty wages that did not exist before.

MA: What are the consequences for Greek schools abroad?

E: These schools aim to provide Greek-speaking students with a full-fledged education until graduation. The Greek state has several such schools abroad. But the state doesn't bother much about them. Due to a lack of finance, therefore, lessons often don't take place. I have already experienced that subjects such as history, Greek language or biology are not offered at all. But these are elementary educational subjects that are important. Even the EU troika [European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund, EU Commission] had to demand that subjects like Greek or history were not dropped. But the opposite is true. The current EU austerity package is increasing the pressure.

I read that the teachers in West Virginia have had to buy school supplies themselves. That is very familiar to me. Clearly, state teachers are underfunded all over the world. I also know that from teaching at Greek schools. For example, we do not have a physics lab, and I must

provide everything for the lesson. I've also collected certain aids at the flea market. Sometimes we lack the simplest things.

MA: You have spoken about the EU troika. What do you think about the new German government, the grand coalition in Berlin? Did you hear that Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) has now appointed a manager of Goldman Sachs as his Secretary of State?

E: I had heard recently that the head of Goldman Sachs in Germany has become a State Secretary. Evidently, the banks are calling the shots everywhere. This has been happening for some time in Greece. This is even more serious [in Greece] because it is so heavily in debt and has to repay huge loans.

With every new government coming into office in any country now, politics are moving to the right. They cut back on education, health and support for parents wherever they can. This widens the gulf between rich and poor and causes a rise in homelessness.

I want to say something about the case of the Essen Tafel [a charity that restricted food handouts to "Germans"]. I don't understand why they are cutting the handouts. I don't believe that there is so little support that they are sending foreigners away. Rather, they obviously want to question the right of people to seek help wherever it exists. For me, that's open racism.

Aren't foreigners also important for the labour force? I already noticed this regarding the headscarf question [the ban on Muslims wearing headscarves in public service jobs] Although people from abroad are urgently needed for the workforce, at the same time, they certainly don't want them to be integrated. This is an attempt to divide workers and prevent them from uniting.

It is similar with the consequences of privatization. Here in Frankfurt, the buses have already been privatized. That's why you don't notice much if there are strikes in the public sector, as is the case now. Many public transit companies, like the buses in Frankfurt, have been outsourced and privatized. Wages are getting worse, but bus drivers are not allowed to go on strike.

In his speech in Leipzig, David North emphasized the importance of "understanding the defeats of workers in the twentieth-century". It is important to understand

how this was all organized, and how the SPD and the unions, including [public services union] Verdi and the [education union] GEW, have helped to organize it all. The SPD is part of the government.

MA: In West Virigina, the unions strangled the teachers' strike as quickly as possible.

E: Yes exactly. The teachers wanted to carry on striking, but the unions cancelled the strike, even though the demands were not yet met. That is no different with us.

In the Greek teachers' strike, most union leaders are Syriza members. They are in the same party as the Education Minister, who imposes fixed-term contracts on them. The union leaders stressed that Gavroglu has promised to hire more teachers in October. In fact, he made it dependent on what's in the EU's third financial compact.

And here in Germany, it is no different. For example, we have never heard from the GEW at our school. The GEW doesn't feel responsible for us, because our school is treated as a private school in Germany. The unions are completely nationalist. It's the same in every country.



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