

Student protests against herd immunity policy spread across Greece

Alex Lantier

25 September 2020

Greek high school students marched Thursday in protests against the government's herd immunity policy as occupations of high schools and strikes by doctors and transport workers spread across the country. This upsurge of social opposition comes as Athens hospitals, devastated by decades of European Union austerity, find themselves swamped with 580 COVID-19 victims as young as 17, including 70 intubated patients.

Amid a total blackout in the international media, students at hundreds of high schools and broad layers of workers are joining the struggle against the EU's back-to-school campaign, led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' right-wing New Democracy (ND) government. The return to school has proceeded without opposition from the trade unions or the main bourgeois opposition party, the pro-austerity Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left").

Protests by high school students against the ND government's guidelines for the return to school continue to accelerate. While on Monday dozens of high schools joined a movement to occupy the schools that began last week, by Tuesday 100 schools were occupied. Yesterday, *Kathimerini* reported that over 200 schools were occupied across Greece, mainly in the Attica region around Athens, Thessaloniki, Crete, Achaea and Magnesia.

Anger is mounting among workers and youth over the lack of social distancing and conditions, such as large class sizes in poorly ventilated classrooms, which ensure that the virus will spread. The main demands of the protesting students include limiting class sizes to 15 and hiring on the basis of permanent contracts the number of teachers necessary to reduce class sizes, along with additional cleaning staff.

Sections of workers are taking strike action in

solidarity, while also demanding wage increases and contract revisions. On Thursday, a strike at the port of Piraeus, near Athens, shut down all traffic, including both merchant shipping and ferries, for 24 hours. From Monday to Wednesday, Olympic Air was forced by strike action to cancel 58 domestic flights between Athens and various Greek islands.

On Thursday, students, joined by teachers and parents, marched in Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece's two largest cities, criticizing both herd immunity policies and the military buildup against Turkey being carried out by the Mitsotakis government, in alliance with France.

Protesting students in Athens spoke to Greece's *Press Project* of how they would speak to Mitsotakis if he were present: "You tell us we are closing schools, but your policy has turned them into health bombs and is resulting in the closure of one after another due to COVID-19! You are telling us that we are right, but that we should sit at home to do you a favor and give up our rights. You have the audacity to tell us that you will satisfy our demands if we back down—while at the same time claiming that nothing can be solved, that we are asking for too much if we demand safe schools."

Protesters also chanted slogans against moves to increase military service to 10 months starting at age 18, and the recent massive arms deal between Paris and Athens, which is aimed at Turkey.

The Coordination Committee of Athens Students, an umbrella organization overseeing student protests and school occupations in the Athens area, echoed this sentiment in a statement criticizing the militarist budget of the Mitsotakis government. The statement read: "The ND government says it will buy 16 Rafale warplanes from France this year at a cost of nearly €4 billion. Then we are told there is no money to hire

teachers who are badly needed to reduce the number of students per classroom.”

Many students note that the €4 billion spent on French weapons to prepare a fratricidal war against Turkey would be enough to hire the 300,000 teachers needed to cut class sizes to 15.

The Greek Communist Youth (KNE), linked to the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE), reported that some school principals and officials are trying to blockade occupied high schools and “slander protesters as ‘mask deniers,’” claiming that they deny the necessity of wearing masks for safety during the pandemic. The KNE said that students are simply making the point that masks will not be enough to halt the spread of the virus between students who spend long periods of time in the same classroom.

On Thursday, in addition to protests by students, Greek hospital doctors protested in Athens outside the Ministry of Health to demand more staff and a scientific approach to fighting the pandemic. “We are here because the government has not taken any actions to help the National Health System,” they told Greece’s *Press Project*. “We will not tolerate becoming a danger to our patients because of the intensification of workloads and our exhaustion. There must be an urgent mass recruitment of permanent staff in hospitals.”

The doctors emphasized their opposition to sackings of temp nursing staff, demanding that all health staff immediately and unconditionally receive permanent employment. They also called for the hiring of one doctor and four nurses for every new intensive care bed that is opened.

“We are here because the government, as at all previous times, whatever its policy, says that scientists suggest but they legislate,” doctors told *Press Project*. Pointing to the rising death toll from the resurgence of COVID-19 in Greece, they denounced “health protocols written to satisfy the requirements of the hotels and the tourist industry... We are seeing the result of a policy that subjugates science to the savage laws of the market.”

Greek officials made clear they intend to ignore the protests and continue EU herd immunity policies. Even with 342 cases and nine deaths on Thursday, Development and Investment Minister Adonis Georgiadis said there would be no lockdown to halt the spread of the virus. “The lockdown will not take place

tomorrow or the day after,” he said. “We are fighting to avoid it. It is the last recourse. It is not the advisory committee on infectious disease that rules, but the government.”

Mitsotakis echoed the comments of Georgiadis in a televised appeal yesterday, demanding that the public wear masks. He said the choice was between “self-protection and lockdown.” He added that “lockdowns mean closed businesses and unemployment,” basing himself on plans for the billions of euros in bailout funding to go only to the banks and major corporations, rather than to workers and small businesses.

As for Syriza leader and former prime minister Alexis Tsipras, he said Syriza should not provide “any opportunities for the government and Mr. Mitsotakis to escape the difficult situation in which they have placed themselves and the country.”

In fact, Tsipras himself bears central political responsibility for the crisis now unfolding in Greece. Elected in 2015 based on pledges to end EU austerity, he betrayed these promises and implemented billions of euros in social cuts that devastated Greek hospitals, schools and other institutions now threatened by COVID-19. Syriza and its allies in the KKE and the Greek trade union bureaucracy are directly implicated in the current disaster.

The alternative for Greek youth and workers is a turn to the European and international working class. Explosive anger is building across Europe and beyond at the financial aristocracy’s herd immunity policy, and protests have already broken out in Madrid.

The political task facing the working class is to prepare general strike action across Europe against herd immunity policies, to take control of the resources necessary to fight the virus, and to bring down anti-working class governments across Europe as part of a common struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact