

UK Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee hears report on Greek school occupations

Our reporter
1 October 2020

The third meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee watched a video showing the mass protests by students in Greece, as an introduction to a report by WSWs writer John Vassilopoulos.

He explained to last Saturday's meeting that the opening of schools on September 14 had been a complete disaster.

"By the end of this week, over 100 schools will be closed due to COVID infections, which has caused a massive backlash in Greece's student body."

Over 200 schools had been occupied, double the number it was at the start of the week [This has now grown to over 700]. Students' demands included a class limit of 15 pupils, hiring teachers on permanent contracts rather than 3-month contracts, as well as employing additional cleaning staff.

Rallies had been held all over the country. In Athens, thousands had marched through the city centre.

Vassilopoulos drew attention to a series of strikes by dock workers at the port of Pireaus, and by doctors, as well as workers at Athens airport. Many of the occupations had also protested against the government's decision to buy 16 warplanes from France at a cost of €4 billion, at a time of rising tensions with Turkey. Greece had consistently spent large amounts on defence—even throughout the last decade of European Union/International Monetary Fund backed austerity, while its education budget has been slashed 27 percent since 2009.

Faced with mounting protests and strikes, the conservative New Democracy government was resorting to authoritarian measures and had already passed a bill this summer severely restricting the right to protest, "There were incidents reported of police intimidation of students in some occupied schools in the country," Vassilopoulos said.

The Greek government was following the same "herd-immunity" policy of allowing the virus to rip through the population as others worldwide. In a recent speech to the nation, Prime Minister Mitsotakis had said schools should be the last and not the first to close in a new upsurge of the pandemic. "This underscores how crucial the opening of schools is in kickstarting the economy from the ruling elite's

perspective."

Vassilopoulos recalled interviewing, for the *World Socialist Web Site*, Evgenia Thanou, General Manager of the NGO Doctors of the World in Athens, at the start of 2015. She had told how the EU-imposed austerity measures meant, "If there was an epidemic outbreak in Greece, it would have a massive impact and unfortunately, we don't know what we would be able to do and how it would be tackled."

After a decade of austerity, where the country had been used as a testing ground by the European Union and the IMF for the implementation of an unprecedented slashing of working and living conditions, conditions would only worsen under the onslaught of the COVID-19 crisis.

Tania Kent, a special needs teacher and leading member of the Socialist Equality Party, drew attention to a statement published on the WSWs Thursday, calling on workers throughout Europe to take independent action against the rapidly escalating infection rates on the continent.

"It is urgent to mobilize the working class across Europe and internationally in a general strike to halt the ongoing resurgence of COVID-19," she said quoting the statement.

In Britain there had been a massive surge in coronavirus outbreaks in education establishments, with over 2,000 schools recording infections. "In just a short three weeks, the lie that schools were ever 'COVID secure' has been shattered. This week, almost one in five positive tests in England were in the under-19 age group.

Educational settings now accounted for 45 percent of all positive cases. Roughly 900 schools had sent pupils home, with over a million children having been off school.

From Melbourne, teacher and member of the Committee for Public Education, Will Marshall said, "In Australia, 26,983 people have contracted the virus, with 861 deaths."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, like Boris Johnson, claimed that education was a "moral duty" of teachers, "although only a short time ago, Morrison was involved in slashing funding to public schools by \$1.9 billion in 2018 and 2019."

This ruthless return to work policy was being met with growing resistance by educators, parents, students. "Motions

were passed at various schools across Australia insisting on closures to halt the spread of COVID-19 and angry responses to the teachers' union were posted on its Facebook Page as teachers accused the union of merely being a copy-and-paste receptacle for the state government."

"At my school, more than half the staff voted overwhelmingly in support of the immediate formation of a workplace Action Committee, independent of the union."

When members of the Committee for Public Education challenged Victoria union president Meredith Peace why the union had agreed to a return to work while there were still outbreaks of coronavirus occurring, her reply had been, "Sorry we don't run the government, we don't get to make the decisions, we don't get the opportunity to agree or disagree with the chief medical officer."

In discussion, John asked, "How would a socialist government in a planned economy educate children in a pandemic like this?... The state would have to introduce effective distance learning channels and make sure that children did not avoid the system." But the "health crisis would probably not be as severe as it is today, with better and earlier planning actually based on current scientific knowledge about viruses..."

Elena, from Dinnington in South Yorkshire, commented, "Government figures show almost half of COVID cases were in educational settings. That's just up to September 20 and before universities opened. Herd immunity in practice. This is a really important initiative."

Masala commented, "Here in Argentina, we're going through a similar path to Greece. There are many strikes among workers but our unions are pro government so there is no single strike to unify the different struggles. Luckily for us, the government could not pass the legislation to reopen the schools."

"Two weeks ago, the government raised the salaries of the police in Buenos Aires. This week, nurses asked for a rise and they got beat up by the police."

"In schools in Germany, a calculated catastrophe is on its way," trainee secondary school teacher Phillip Frisch said. "Since the unrestricted opening of all schools as well as the wider economy, infections among adolescents and young adults have risen sharply. In North Rhine-Westphalia, 7,000 pupils and 580 teachers are in quarantine." In Bavaria, 8,800 students and 771 teachers must stay at home. "In the state of Hesse, the Ministry of Education reported that over 4,700 pupils and 480 teachers were in quarantine at the end of last week."

Nurse Rory told the meeting about the comments of a frontline nurse from London, who said, "The thought of a second peak is terrifying—I am worried about my whole team. I saw how emotionally and physically draining it was the first time. I'm not sure they would be able to cope... We must do everything we can to avoid a second wave."

More than 650 health and social care workers had already died of COVID-19 in the UK, which had the highest death toll

among health and social care workers in the world. None of the unsafe government guidelines on PPE had changed regardless of extremely high fatalities. "We still have to wear flimsy aprons that don't cover our arms or uniform, and a simple face mask and gloves, even if patients are tested positive for COVID-19."

The government's own advisors, earlier this week, had said that by mid-October, there could be 7.5 times more cases a day than today. "How many more will end up in hospitals? How many more will be on ventilators? Yesterday, [September 25] there were 40 reported deaths. How many more deaths will occur by 3 weeks' time? How many more health and care workers will lose their lives while trying to save others?"

Graduate teaching assistant Frankie related his experience of the current preparations at the universities to force students and staff back into the classroom. Teaching work had been moved online at the end of the previous academic year, "because we didn't believe that it was safe to have individual conversations in close contact with a class of students."

"Despite this, the university—under pressure from both the government and its own need to maintain its revenue—is insisting that all departments must run a programme of 'blended learning', running in-person classes whether or not it is safe."

"Students, and GTAs (graduate teaching assistants) had been told by the university that if they did not feel safe returning to classrooms, they would be given the option of online teaching and learning. However, in practise this option is unavailable to many."

The University and College Union (UCU) had done nothing to ensure students and staff were safe. The new "left" leadership of the UCU had been exactly as dishonest and feckless as the previous one, a clear sign that this rotten organisation could not be reformed and made to fight for staff safety by any amount of "pressure from below".



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