School occupations continue in Greece as students resist government blackmail and violence

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Thousands of students demonstrated last Thursday in several Greek cities, including Athens and Thessaloniki, against the right-wing Greek New Democracy (ND) government's criminal handling of the coronavirus pandemic. "The mask is not the only protection–spend money on education!" And "We are not costs, we are the future!" were some of the slogans chanted and displayed on banners. Along with the protests, general assemblies and protest actions were organised at schools.

Since the homicidal reopening of schools two weeks ago, students, with the support of parents and teachers, have been fighting against the attempt to force them back into dilapidated school buildings, where they face the deadly threat of the coronavirus without adequate protection. According to the Education Ministry, 141 schools have either been partially or fully closed due to coronavirus outbreaks. Hundreds more schools have been occupied by students. Pupils are demanding much smaller classes with a maximum of 15 students, more teachers and cleaners, shorter lesson times, the use of additional buildings, as well as safe, affordable and regularly-operating transportation.

Growing numbers of students are participating in the protests. Universities are supposed to open over the coming days in spite of rapidly increasing coronavirus figures in Greece. On Monday, students occupied the president's office at Aristotiles University in Thessaloniki to demand safety measures, including restrictions on numbers of students, the making available of additional buildings and lecture halls, free coronavirus testing, and the hiring of more teaching staff and cleaners.

The readiness of the students to fight has taken the government by surprise. Hundreds of the 700 schools originally occupied remain under occupation. The government is attempting to suppress the movement with brutal force so that it does not spread to the entire working class. They are not only relying on media propaganda and right-wing agitation to do this, but are also employing blackmail and physical violence.

At the central rally in Syntagma Square, the police fired tear gas at the students and arrested two demonstrators, aged 17 and 20. In addition, a new order from the Education Ministry, introducing compulsory online classes for all schools currently under occupation, came into force on Thursday. The lesson hours missed out on due to school occupations are to be performed on Saturdays, public holidays, and on field days.

ND Education Minister Niki Kerameus went a step further on the day of the demonstrations. She announced that all students involved in school occupations would be excluded from the online classes and marked as having missed class. These missed classes would be included in the behavioural evaluation of the students' report cards, even though this behavioural evaluation was ruled in September to be in violation of data protection and the constitution. The repressive measures could result in students not being allowed to move on to the next year of their education. After a student misses more than 114 hours of class time, secondary school students in Greece (including the gymnasium classes 7 to 9 and lyceum classes 10 to 12) have to repeat a year.

Kerameus intends to use head teachers at schools to identify and denounce the most active students. She stated, "Every head teacher has a good idea of which students are disrupting in-person classes." Reports revealed that in Chania on the island of Crete, the police wrote to schools demanding detailed information about the students involved in the occupations, as well as details on their legal guardians.

Police officers are using ruthless violence against students. Police units have been sent to occupied schools on numerous occasions. The Greek Facebook page "COVID-19 Solidarity" (Menoume energoi–We will stay active) reported on a case last week at the 46th lyceum in the Athens district of Exarcheia, where students were attacked by the police as they tried to hang a banner in their school. "The students were chased around the school on Asklipiou and Ippokratous streets by plainclothes officers and members of the special OPKE unit. The students were beaten by the police and told us that they were forced to go to the police station under threat of weapons being deployed against them. There they were held for two hours, without their legal guardians being informed," stated the Facebook post.

This frontal attack by the government and its police thugs has been met with widespread outrage and anger. The students have vowed to continue the occupations and hold online general assemblies. The student coordinating committees, which organised student protest actions prior to the pandemic, have called for further protests on Wednesday and Friday.

Xanthos Germanakos, a member of the Athens student coordinating committee and a lyceum student in the Pirama district near the capital, told an interview on the ANT1 television channel last Friday that the police's actions were totally "unacceptable." "We will not tolerate the repression and terrorising," he added. At his school, 125 students out of the 170 who attended the general assembly voted in favour of the occupation. He rejected the media propaganda against the school occupiers and stressed, "Every young person has the right and the

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duty to society to fight for his and his family's health, as well as education at a high level."

Due to the catastrophic social conditions facing many families in Greece, the students are demanding substantial investments in schools and the education system, instead of just a transition to online learning. "As is well known, 30 percent of students don't have internet access, but the ministry just ignores this, " noted Germanakos. It is not the students, but the government that is withholding the students' right to an education.

While the students remain unintimidated and are bravely demanding their rights, the trade unions are desperately seeking for ways to bring the situation under control. The secondary school teachers union, OLME, has announced it will strike between 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. from Monday to Friday, and refuse to participate in online classes. This is above all a response to the angry mood among teachers. The trade unions are attempting to contain the mounting opposition and block a broader mobilisation against the government's deadly reopening policy.

A revealing example of OLME's right-wing orientation was the interview given by its president, Theodoros Tsouchlos, to the right-wing extremist journalist and ND parliamentary deputy Konstantinos Bogdanos. Bogdanos previously denounced the students as "snakes" and described the occupations as "illegal." This time around, he accused the students of criminality and violence.

Tsouchlos, who is a member of ND's trade union wing, DAKE, praised Bogdanos as an "excellent sociologist, graduate of the Panteion University, and member of parliament" from whom he hoped to receive support in solving the problems of school occupations.

Tsouchlos insisted that OLME's main concern was ensuring schools stayed open. However, the government's measures would require teachers to carry out surveillance on students. Tsouchlos fears this could trigger more resistance and is pushing for an end to the protests. "We should ensure classes for students so that the whole situation can calm down."

At the end of the interview, he admitted that OLME opposes the school occupations, and said the union had been waiting to hold talks with Kerameus for two weeks. Only if OLME is involved in talks could it play a positive role in reaching solutions to the situation said Tsouchlos. The references to a positive role and a solution can mean only one thing: OLME is ready to suppress and control the protests so that they don't spread like wildfire and draw the working class into struggle.

The fact that Tsouchlos talks extensively with the right-wing extremist Bogdanos and even appeals for his help and advice speaks volumes about the trade unions and the organisations affiliated with them, including the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and pseudo-left Syriza. The youth organisations of these parties are seeking to win influence in the protests so they can confine them to an entirely nationalist outlook. Although opposition to the deadly return to school and work is growing everywhere, the unions are not calling for a Europe-wide general strike or making appeals to students and workers around the world.

The publications of the sister organisations of the KKE and Syriza across Europe have remained just as silent about the occupations as their bourgeois counterparts. And we know why that is the case. Parties like Podemos in Spain and the Left Party in Germany are themselves involved in reopening schools and workplaces so that the capitalist economy can keep running. They fear nothing more than a revolution from below, which would endanger the privileges and interests of the middle class for whom they speak.

Students at schools and universities, and workers must draw the necessary lessons from these experiences. They can only wage their struggles for safe conditions at schools and workplaces, and against social inequality and war independently of and in opposition to the trade unions and pseudo-left parties. They must arm themselves with an internationalist and socialist programme and fight for the overthrow of the capitalist system.

In Greece in particular, the pandemic has brought to the surface and accelerated the social decline of recent decades. In the public education sector, 20,000 jobs were eliminated and the budget was cut by 27 percent. This onslaught has resulted in the devastation of schools and impoverishment of families.

One particularly extreme example is a school in Heraklion, Crete, with 100 disabled children, which has been occupied by parents. They are protesting against the catastrophic conditions in the building, which was only intended as a temporary solution but has been home to the school for 10 years. Maria Merkoulidi, one of the mother's affected, told television channel Mega TV, "These are third world conditions. Our children are expected to go to school in a building without building permission, without heating and with no infrastructure for disabled people. Every winter, there is a flood in the building and the school has to close because the electricity is inadequate and there is a risk of electric shocks. And the roof leaks." The mother explained how the coronavirus has worsened the situation.

But as the students have repeatedly emphasised in their protests, the government is not spending billions on education and health care, but in rearmament and war. It has announced the purchase of 16 Rafale fighter jets from France for almost €4 billion, and is stepping up its threats against Turkey. In addition, military service is to be extended to 10 months and the age for service reduced to 18 years.

Last week, Defence Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos presented a new agreement with the United States that will strengthen NATO's Souda base on Crete. The deal was supported by votes not only from ND and Kinal, the former social democrats, but also Syriza, which prepared the ground for the agreement with the Trump administration when it was in power from 2015-19. During Syriza's period in government, the US navy's activities on Crete grew significantly. The base plays a key logistical and geopolitical role for NATO operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, where the war danger continues to mount.

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