

Greek government passes bill allowing police onto campuses for first time since 1982

Robert Stevens
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Greece's right-wing New Democracy (ND) government passed its authoritarian Education Bill in the face of large scale protests Thursday evening.

The Bill establishes a special campus police force for the surveillance of universities. The university police force is empowered to "guard" campuses and will be able to arrest those deemed troublemakers by the authorities. The university police will be answerable to the Hellenic Police force rather than the education institutions they are patrolling. The law established a 'disciplinary council' able to suspend or expel students.

The Bill overturns the law, put in place in 1982, barring police from entering university campuses. Police were only allowed entry to campus grounds if given permission by university administrators. The law, which existed nowhere else in Europe, guaranteed students protection from arrest or state brutality.

The Education Bill also limits the length of time students can stay enrolled before getting a degree. More than 77,000 students were admitted to Greece's public universities last year, with no tuition fees charged for undergraduate studies. Many students will be forced to abandon their courses.

The government won the vote in the 300-seat parliament by a majority of 166 deputies in favour and 132 against. It was passed with the support of the 10 deputies of the far-right Greek Solution party, who have come to prominence following the outlawing of the fascist Golden Dawn.

The main opposition party, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) voted against, as did the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Movement for Change (KINAL) and MeRA25 (The European Realistic Disobedience Front).

The 1982 Law was put in place in response to the brutal murder by the US-backed military junta of at least 23 students and civilians, including a five-year-old boy, during the uprising at the Polytechnic University in Athens—now called the National Technical University of

Athens, on November 17, 1973. Students were calling for the downfall of the military junta, led by George Papadopoulos, which had taken power in 1967. On that day, the third day of protests, students launched a strike under the slogan of "Bread, Education, Freedom." The junta crushed the protest, with tanks and soldiers crashing through the university's gates to carry out the slaughter.

Tens of thousands of students and education workers have been protesting the Education Bill throughout the country for weeks. They have chanted 'Bread, Education, Freedom,' connecting their struggle with that against the junta. The protests came to a crescendo during the last week with demonstrations of thousands in Athens, the second city Thessaloniki and other towns and cities.

Students and education staff put forward demands including withdrawal of the bill, no University Police, reopening of the faculties in the spring semester; no study limits or removal of students from university; no disciplinary law; no to the higher access restrictions of public universities, no to the equalization of private college degrees with universities, public, free education for all, and hands off the Student Associations.

The protests were met with massive police violence. On Wednesday police in Athens and Thessaloniki, included the motorcycled MAT squad, attacked students with teargas and truncheons. Reports and photos show police attacking protesters while they are on the ground. As a march of students near the Propylaea neared its end, police continued their attacks leaving protesters with serious injuries. Speaking to education news website alfavita.gr, former Athens Polytechnic Dean Nikos Markatos said, 'We saw police riding their motorcycles towards protesters. They were beating a kid on the head with a fire extinguisher. My son is at the Red Cross Hospital with a broken shoulder and will be wearing a brace for three weeks. A total of four kids were taken to the Red Cross Hospital following the police violence.'

Press Project reported that Markatos “also made a chilling accusation”, stating that “a police officer broke the jaw and took out the teeth of a student who is currently in the operating theatre.”

Riot police threw journalist Yiannis Liakos to the ground. “The rest of the journalists were at the receiving end of police hostility while at the same time police officers were attempting to prevent photo journalists from taking pictures of those arrested in order to prevent them from recording the violent scenes even against people who were lying on the ground.”

In Athens, police made 52 arrests Wednesday—with 24 charged on Thursday morning. Dozens of students organised a solidarity rally outside courts to support the detainees. A selection of videos uploaded to social media can be viewed at the Press Project web site here.

During the police rampage, a MeRA25 parliamentary deputy and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Sofia Sakorafa, suffered an assault outside the General Police Directorate of Attica. Sakorafa was part of a delegation of MeRA25 deputies and hundreds of others protesting the mass arrests of those being held inside.

Introducing the Bill, ND Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis slandered students as he portrayed universities as dens of criminality and violence. “Nowhere in the world do we see images... of historical buildings being vandalised, equipment being looted,’ he said. Mitsotakis claimed that on campus teachers were beaten, women raped and drugs trafficked.

While in power, SYRIZA carried out even harsher austerity than the ND and social democratic governments before it. SYRIZA enforced this through state violence and was instrumental in establishing Greece as the EU’s border force to keep out desperate immigrants and asylum seekers fleeing war zones.

Speaking in parliament, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras, while voting against the Education Bill, gave succour to Mitsotakis’ claims that the universities were hives of criminality. He argued that the government already had enough repressive forces of the state to clamp down on campuses, so why did they need more? “If the government believe that universities are indeed centres of criminality and lawlessness then all it needs to do is send as many police officers as are needed and as many times as it is necessary to rid them from lawlessness.

He asked, “Why haven’t [the police] solved the problem? And why will this be solved by the creation of police units within universities?”

Fofi Gennimata, the leader of the Movement for

Change, which includes the remnants of the social democratic PASOK which was wiped out electorally for imposing austerity, called instead for universities to be guarded by private companies.

The measures allowing the return of police to campuses are part of a raft of dictatorial measures enacted by the ND government that came to power in 2019.

Using the pandemic as a pretext, Chief of the Hellenic Police Michalis Karamalakis mounted a huge police operation consisting of 5,000 cops and armoured vehicles and banned all public gatherings of four or more people between November 15 and November 18 last year. This is the period when many commemorate the crushing of the students protests by the junta.

Last month, the government introduced a draconian bill stipulating that journalists will be limited to standing in a “specific spot” during demonstrations. The measure is opposed by every journalist association.

Last July, ND passed, with the support of Movement for Change and Greek Solution, a draconian law was passed restricting the right to protest. Protest organisers must now give advance notice of any planned public assembly “to the relevant local police or port authority.” The police or authorities are given the power to impose restrictions and even refuse permission for protests outright on public safety grounds, or if “there is a serious threat to disturb the socio-economic life of a particular area.”

From 2008, Greece was used as a test case for enforcing savage austerity throughout Europe, at the behest of the European Union, International Monetary Fund and the world’s financial institutions. Greece is again at the forefront as the ruling class moves to intensify its attacks on the living stands of the working class, to be imposed by dictatorial means.

New Democracy has pushed through anti-strike measures, including a requirement for the introduction of electronic voting by organisations calling a strike. This was carried out after Labour Minister Yiannis Vroutsis announced a new labour law bill last October based on a “flexible eight-hour workday”. This seeks to give employers the power to increase the working day from eight hours to 10 hours without paying overtime.



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