

Greek teachers and students strike against attacks on education and lack of protection from the coronavirus

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Teachers and students across Greece carried out a 24-hour strike on Monday. In the capital Athens, some 10,000 teachers, students and parents took to the streets to protest recent attacks on public education and the lack of protection from the coronavirus in the schools.

Thousands joined rallies and strikes in other cities as well, making Monday's strike the biggest mobilization of educators and students in several years. The mounting resistance in Greece coincides with growing protests against the deadly herd immunity policies of governments worldwide, such as the October 15 global school strike organized by parents in the United Kingdom.

According to Greek teachers' associations, about 70 percent of teachers and educators nationwide responded to the strike call. In the Attica region, which includes the capital, public sector employees also stopped work for three hours. The one-day strike followed school occupations by students throughout Greece two weeks ago.

The protests are directed against new laws passed by the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government, which will lead to a further erosion of the public education system. In the summer, Parliament passed a law for a new evaluation system in schools, which has met with massive resistance from teachers. The government responded with a frontal attack on the right to strike.

When teachers' unions called for a strike against the evaluation system two weeks ago, Education Minister Niki Kerameos (ND) filed a lawsuit that was upheld by a court ruling. The strike was banned as illegal on the grounds that it was directed against a law that had already been passed. The unions appealed and announced a new strike, against which Kerameos again took legal action.

The OLME (secondary) and DOE (elementary) teachers unions organized the strikes in response to enormous opposition and seething anger among teachers and students. But the unions' goals are diametrically opposed to those of the strikers. While the latter want to expand their struggle and turn it against the government, the unions are trying to control and ultimately suppress the resistance.

The leader of OLME, Theodoros Tsouchlas, is a member of the ruling ND party and its trade union wing, DAKE. Last autumn, in an interview with far-right journalist and ND deputy Konstantinos Bogdanos, he asserted that OLME's main goal was to enable school openings during the pandemic and to curb school occupations.

Throughout the year-and-a-half of the pandemic, the teachers' unions were partly responsible for the unsafe reopening of the schools. Tellingly, they have not even raised demands for coronavirus protective measures in the current strike, even though concerns about infections spreading in schools are omnipresent among teachers.

The demonstrators gathered Monday in front of the Athens Court of Appeals, where the unions' appeal was being heard. They marched from

there to the Parliament building in Syntagma Square and joined with the protesting students.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers and students about the background to the strike and the situation in the schools, which reopened for full face-to-face classes in mid-September despite rising infection levels.

Vasia Chioti, a primary school teacher in Athens, said, "The new evaluation system that they want to impose on us aims to categorize schools and divide them into different speeds. The government wants to introduce corporate structures in schools and oblige them to seek funding for school operations themselves. It's really a privatization of public education."

She noted that many parents were at the demonstration because they feared they would have to pay for private schools for their children in the future.

"We are against all these measures because all children—no matter what class position they come from—must have the same rights and access to education," Vasia stressed.

She said the teachers also objected to the lack of coronavirus protection. "No basic measures were actually taken at all against the pandemic," she told the WSWS, "such as reducing the number of students in classes. On the contrary, the whole responsibility is shifted onto the teachers. But with 25 children in a classroom of 40 square metres, you can't maintain even the most rudimentary distancing." She noted that as an English teacher, she worked with different grade levels and therefore came into contact with about 200 students in the course of a week.

"The government says, 'If you can, take separate breaks.' But you can't do that at all because teachers' working hours are very limited. Or the kids are supposed to come in from different doors, but those aren't even available."

She pointed out that since there was not yet an approved vaccine for elementary school children, they were especially at risk. "We are very worried about how the winter will turn out," she said.

Overall, she said, the social situation was catastrophic: "Greece, after all, has been in crisis since 2010, and with the pandemic, the consequences will be even worse. In the last two years, many people did not have a job and prices increased sharply. At the same time, in the crisis, some get richer and others get poorer. That's how it works in capitalism."

Participation in the strike among her colleagues was "extremely high," she said, because their situation is already precarious. "Even before the pandemic," she noted, "teachers' salaries were cut. Almost a third of educators in Greece are substitute teachers and have been for over 10 years. They are usually hired in September and fired in June. These are flexible work arrangements."

Tasos Kosmas, who teaches computer science at a school in the southern

Athens district of Nea Smyrni, warned: “Under the pretext of the pandemic, they have found a new trick, which is to hire substitute teachers for only three months to fill in gaps during the pandemic. It’s a pretext, of course. They want to implement the flexible work contracts that already exist in Spain and Portugal.”

Non-tenured teachers get about 700 euros a month, Tasos said. He has a permanent position. “But I don’t even net 1,000 euros despite all my university degrees,” he said. “Rent costs about 500 euros, electricity has become more expensive, food too—it’s just not enough.”

Many teachers had to give private lessons on top of their regular job to make ends meet, he notes. “Prices in our supermarkets are even higher than in Germany and France. And, after all, we have 10 years of austerity memoranda behind us.”

In Greece, all of the establishment parties—ND, the social-democratic Pasok (now Kinal) and the pseudo-left Syriza—have enforced the austerity dictates of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, laid down by the so-called “memoranda.”

Tasos said he feared that with the new law on evaluation would come “the privatization of education through the back door” and that schools would be turned into a “mouthpiece of government.”

He also criticized the unsafe hygiene conditions, saying, “There was no division of school classes to minimize the coronavirus danger. It’s a class system. They don’t want real education, they want to use the schools as a repository for children, where they are kept so the parents can go to work. That’s their goal, nothing else.”

Like everywhere else in the world, schools in Greece are in a dilapidated state and have enormous technical and material deficiencies. When remote learning was instituted last year, he said, about 20 percent of students were excluded because they had no internet or technical equipment. The government provided almost no support and teachers had to use their own tech devices.

“My school requested 40 tablets and only got 10,” he said. “In the province, the internet and infrastructure are even worse.”

Hundreds of students also gathered in Syntagma Square, including Angelos, who held up a banner with his classmates reading, “We are not a cost, we are the future.”

The students are calling for the repeal of new regulations on Greece’s Central Baccalaureate exams and higher university admission hurdles, which have led to 40,000 young people being excluded from universities this year.

Speaking to the WWSWS, Angelos explained, “We want a school that educates us universally and where we don’t just get skills so that we can be cheap labour in the future for the rest of our lives. We want everyone to have free and open access to public education.”

He, too, is angry about the lack of protection in schools. “We have 25 students in a small classroom,” he said. “We can’t maintain any distancing at all. Our school building is very old. Although we’ve been asking for free mass testing since last year, there hasn’t been any up to now.”

The new “50 percent plus 1” rule, which means that a class is not closed until more than half of the students are sick, is particularly dangerous, he said. “Even if a classmate sitting next to you gets infected, they’re just supposed to take a test. There’s no protection at all. We already have a huge number of COVID deaths and people seriously ill. This has to stop.”

That is why Angelos and his classmates recently occupied the school and organized school assemblies to plan their participation in the strike. He stressed: “The government’s priority is the corporations, not the schools and the majority of the population. A lot of money has been given to a few who only want to make profits. When they support the corporate bosses and not the employees, or when they introduce bills in the middle of the pandemic to buy military equipment instead of investing the money in public education, we see what their orientation is.”

Angelos considers the government’s crackdown on the protests a

“coordinated attempt to contain the students’ struggle.” He said, “The government is trying to stop the strike by means of the court cases. With this, they want to terrorize us.”

The teacher Tasos had a similar view. He said, “With these attacks, they want to suppress the resistance. I have been to other educators demonstrations in the last two years and they used tear gas and water cannons without any reason. They don’t want anyone to resist their policies.”

That was why they poured millions of euros into the mainstream media to make them report in a way that was loyal to the government, he said. “But they don’t understand that they are making it worse. Because we inform ourselves through the internet, which is still free.”

New Democracy has lost enormous support due to its disastrous coronavirus policies, he said. “With over 15,000 dead, Greece has one of the worst records in the EU. This will come back to them like a boomerang. They are telling us that this is the new normal. They want us all to get the virus.”

He himself was infected in July, he said, because there were no protective measures in place. “But the pandemic must not be the new normal.”

Tasos is trying to network, especially with his colleagues and on the internet. “There must be mass struggles. We need good information for the people, but with our own media, because the mass media have turned into media for mass deception.”

In his view, Syriza and the other parties in Greece were following roughly the same policies as the government. “That’s why we need to build something that really represents the people,” he stressed. “But often the strikes are controlled. Very few organizations are for the workers. Most act as mouthpieces for their respective governments. We’ve seen that in all occupations, and that’s why participation in demonstrations and strikes has decreased.”

But today, he said, masses had taken to the streets. “Every profession is suffering under this government, everyone is angry. But those at the top don’t want everyone to unite; they’re trying to control us.”

He said the pandemic openly revealed the decline of capitalism. “The system has to change—including the mode of production and the way we treat the environment. Everything is oriented only to profit. We and our children will pay for destroying our planet.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International call on all teachers, students and workers in Greece to build rank-and-file committees for safe education and safe workplaces, and to organize independently of the unions and establishment parties.

In May, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was launched to link workers’ protests worldwide and fight for a strategy to eradicate the virus.

We urge readers to contact us and register for the WWSWS and IWA-RFC online webinar on October 24, titled “How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication.”



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