

“Get COVID out of schools!”: Hundreds of school occupations in Greece

Katerina Selin
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Students in Greece have occupied more than 250 schools in protest against the unsafe reopening of schools following the winter holidays, most of them in the capital Athens, in the second largest city, Thessaloniki, and on the island of Crete.

Local protest rallies by teachers also took place during the first week of school. On Friday, students protested in front of the Ministry of Education in Athens, and on the same day the number of school occupations rose to over 350, according to the education website esos.gr.

In the first year of the pandemic, Greek students had already forced the closure of their schools with 700 occupations. Last autumn, school occupations broke out again, as well as a nationwide teachers' strike.

Now, an international wave of protests is unfolding against the deliberate mass infection policies of capitalist governments. Students and teachers are protesting in several US cities, in France teachers went on strike on Thursday, and in Germany, the courageous protest of a student in Hagen triggered many solidarity messages across social media.

Although the infection figures in Greece are at record levels, in-person teaching began in schools a week ago. On the Skai television channel, Nikos Tzanakis, a professor of pneumology (pulmonology), estimated that there were currently up to 80,000 active cases in schools.

The reopening took place “under the worst conditions, both in terms of hygiene and education,” Fani Christani, a student representative from the northern region of Eastern Thrace, told the press in a video interview. Even before the holidays, 20 to 30 percent of all COVID cases were students, she said.

“It is now clear that the hygiene measures are ridiculous,” Christani said. “The survival of the economy is apparently more important than our health and safety.” The fact that the students' demands were not implemented was a “political decision,” she said, adding that the government had instead been cutting health and education spending for years. Almost €2 billion had been cut in education alone over the last 10 years.

The Coordinating Committee of Athens Students, which called for the protest in front of the Education Ministry, is demanding, among other things, a reduction in class sizes, the immediate hiring of more teaching staff, free and more frequent rapid tests under the professional guidance of the Health Ministry, free masks and more cleaning staff. “We will not allow you to play with our health and lives as if they don't matter!” their statement reads.

Updated guidelines are in effect from this week, with the government under the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (ND-New Democracy) reiterating that full in-person classes should take place in all schools. Apart from basic face coverings and two rapid tests per week, there are no protective measures. The hated 50+1 rule remains in place, i.e., a class does not have to be quarantined until more than half of the pupils test positive. As in other countries, the isolation and quarantine period in Greece has been reduced to five days.

In addition, teachers who are sick with COVID or in quarantine are being asked to provide distance learning from home “on a voluntary basis and if they are able to do so.” The announced recruitment of 2,500 substitute teachers to fill the gaps is seen by teachers as a drop in the ocean. Chronic staff shortages in schools are leading to overcrowded classrooms, exacerbated by classes being merged in the middle of the pandemic.

In an interview with the online newspaper *The PressProject*, Theodora, a primary school teacher in Athens, said her school already had three teachers with symptoms and about 40 percent of all students were absent because they were either infected or “their parents are afraid to send them to school under these conditions.” The reality, she said, was grim: “The conditions and rules we have opened with can only be seen as regulations for the mass transmission of coronavirus. Infections in schools and then at home, in children and the school staff and so on...”

In a video interview with striking pupils on the island of Lesbos by local newspaper *stonisi.gr*, student Kalliroi stresses that her teachers fully support the demands of the occupation and are themselves distressed by the increase in cases of infection at school. Their banner on the school gate reads in red letters, “Get COVID out of schools!” They are demanding immediate distance learning to contain the pandemic.

Students at a lyceum in the Cretan port city of Iraklion described their dire situation in a protest letter dated January 11: “The new, more contagious variant, the increasing number of cases and personal negligence pose a threat to the health and development of the student community.” They point to the record number of 50,000 new infections nationwide just days before school started.

Their hometown of Iraklion was at risk level 5 and “in our residential area, family members, relatives, friends and neighbours of classmates and ourselves have fallen ill, with some in dire straits.” While the Minister of Education claims face-to-face teaching is crucial for children's development, there was “a

climate of insecurity in classrooms where students cannot flourish.”

In the small town of Kilkis in Macedonia, in northern Greece, all secondary schools are participating in the occupations. According to a regional union representative, 16 teachers had already contracted COVID-19 before school started and afterwards another three teachers became infected; some had to be hospitalised.

The students of the 2nd Lyceum in Kilkis, who are continuing classes online, accuse the Ministry of Education of having “decided to open schools amid the worst wave since the beginning of the pandemic, disregarding the recommendations of experts and with complete indifference to the health of students and teachers. Despite complaints from all sides, the schools remain open, causing the virus to spread further and many of our fellow students to be absent from class with no opportunity to catch up on material online.” With their occupation of the school building, they are demanding “the cessation of face-to-face classes and their replacement with online teaching.”

Resistance is also growing at universities. At a general assembly last week, students at the Athens University of Economics and Business (OPA), voted to occupy their university, which then began on Friday. Their demands include the resignation of the rector, free and multiple rapid tests for all students and no campus police and surveillance on campus.

Students at Thessaloniki’s Aristotle University are also protesting against the herd immunity policy. “Our universities will become hotbeds of infection in the near future with the government’s decision,” says Paraskevi Tsekoura, a member of the Agricultural Science Student Council, according to the voria.gr website. Exams are to be implemented without any protective measures.

Responding to the combative pupils and students, who take scientific knowledge seriously and want to prevent further victims, Education Minister Niki Kerameos (ND) displayed her unscrupulous arrogance. The first week of school had gone “smoothly,” she claimed. Children could now return to school to “acquire valuable knowledge and skills and develop socially and psycho-emotionally.”

It remains Kerameos’ secret how a child can “develop socially and psycho-emotionally” when he or she has to sit anxiously crammed into a classroom with 25 classmates, infects himself or herself and, in the worst case scenario, even becomes seriously ill or witnesses the death of a relative. The life of a 14-year-old teenager in the Lamia region came to a tragic end last week. Just three days after being admitted to the emergency room with his parents, who were also infected, the boy died of coronavirus in intensive care.

With almost 22,000 victims, Greece has one of the highest death rates in the European Union. In a video posted on social media at the beginning of January, a Greek nurse described how catastrophic the situation was in hospitals. On the COVID ward where she works, she said, only two nurses are responsible for 46 patients. “It’s like we are in a war zone. We are fighting without soldiers, without ammunition, without anything,” she said. “People are dying and will continue to die.”

This is the reality that holds a mirror up to the official lie of

“child welfare” in the reopened schools. The government needs face-to-face education at all costs so that children are looked after so adults can go to work and produce profits for the corporations. The policy of deliberate mass infection affects all spheres of life—from workplaces to educational institutions.

The government is therefore cracking down on school occupations with harsh repressive measures. Teachers are being urged to switch to distance learning during occupations, but to exclude students involved in the strike and to book them for absenteeism.

Many teachers are refusing to implement this order. The secondary teachers union OLME is also calling for opposition to the measures and is calling for a demonstration in front of the school management centre in Athens today. OLME criticises the lack of protective measures in schools and had demanded the reopening of schools be postponed for one week. It called for a two-hour protest strike on the first day of school.

The unions and their pseudo-left supporters are desperately trying to control the growing opposition, and to suppress a broad movement of students, teachers and other sections of the working class against the government’s “profits before lives” policy. They have consistently supported opening schools and workplaces during the pandemic and diverted opposition into harmless channels.

When teachers went on strike across the country in October last year to fight the attacks on the public education system and for better coronavirus protections, OLME ensured that the strike ended quickly before it could spread. Although most union members voted to continue the industrial action in local general assemblies, the OLME union leadership voted against it.

Students and teachers need new organisations of struggle that are independent of the trade unions and pro-capitalist parties. The Rank-and-File Committees for Safe Education, already established in several countries, are fighting as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for a globally coordinated lockdown with full wage compensation and a strategy to eliminate COVID-19.



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