

Greek government enacts private university laws, facing down mass protests with police repression

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Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis pledged this week to continue the brutal crackdown on students, youth and workers fighting new university legislation. The bill opens university education to the private sector and is aimed at dismantling the right to free universal higher education. It was passed by 159 to 129 votes in the 300-seat parliament in which New Democracy holds a clear majority.

Greece has 24 accredited public universities, as well as several private colleges. More than 650,000 students are currently enrolled at state-run universities.

The new measures allow private universities to operate as Greek branches of foreign educational institutions and offer degrees equivalent to those offered by public universities. Although operating under a “nonprofit” status, they would be able to charge tuition fees.

The law will favour wealthy families able to pay exorbitant fees. By eroding public provision, it will harm young people’s job prospects in a country where youth unemployment has been at record levels for over a decade.

Passing the law was unconstitutional as private institutions have been prohibited from operating as independent universities for almost 50 years. Following the fall of the military junta in 1973, Article 16 of the 1975 Constitution stipulated that tertiary education is exclusively “public and free of charge.”

Greece’s ruling elite, with many ties to those in power during the junta era, wants to restore private sector control over campuses and quell an area of society that has long been a bastion of left-wing ideology and activity.

Tens of thousands of students have protested nationwide over the last months, with riot police brutally attacking demonstrations. By the third week of January, around 250 out of Greece’s 450 faculties and departments were under

occupation, with hundreds of academics signing petitions opposing the private university plans. The conservative daily *Kathimerini* referred to student assemblies as “battlefields” and occupations as a “virus” that had “also spread to secondary education.”

On March 9, tens of thousands protested in Athens’ Syntagma Square, with the participation of nearly 200 student groups from universities nationwide, alongside others protesting Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Riot police attacked demonstrators with tear gas and stun grenades and waded into them with batons and shields.

Anna Adamidi, a philosophy student on the protest, told Associated Press, “This government wants to privatise everything ... but at the same time, the cost of living is going up and up and our wages remain pitiful. The private sector comes in and dismantles public education, making use of resources that they will pay nothing for.”

On March 16, riot police smashed into Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and arrested 49 students involved in the occupation of several departments at the School of Applied Sciences. The arrested, aged between 19 and 30, were charged with obstruction of justice and serious disruption of the smooth operation of a legal entity under public law.

At the same time, police raided the University of Athens’ Zografo campus, making two arrests.

On Tuesday, Mitsotakis vowed to continue the crackdown, saying, “I want to again repeat that illegal acts will not be tolerated; the government and Greek Police will be at the forefront in rendering university institutions to those who really belong there, students and professors, so that universities remain centres of knowledge and not a refuge for those... who seek to turn them into dens of violence and a space for barren conflicts.”

Every previous attempt by right-wing conservative-led governments to allow private universities was prevented by mass protests.

Almost 20 years ago—in 2006 and prior to the onset of mass austerity imposed in Greece by successive governments from 2010—students and academic staff held months of mass demonstrations, rallies and occupations of universities. The movement against the Karamanlis ND government saw 350 of Greece’s 456 faculties under occupation by students, with more than 100,000 students participating in rallies and protests.

The ability of ND to sweep into office last year, pursue its class war agenda, and finally pass the laws, is entirely the responsibility of Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left-Progressive Alliance.)

Taking power in 2015 under Alexis Tsipras, Syriza, with staunch backing from pseudo-left groups internationally—who hailed it as the wave of the future—deepened an austerity offensive in alliance with the trade unions, without precedent on the European continent. Tsipras authorised the use of police units to break up a student occupation at the Technical University of Athens within months of taking office.

In July 2019, Syriza was booted out of office as millions of workers deserted this rotten party. Routed again in the 2023 election, though still the main opposition party in parliament, Syriza now reaches barely 10 percent in the polls.

The ruling class seized on this opportunity. In 2021 ND passed its authoritarian Education Bill, again in the face of large protests, establishing a special campus police force for the surveillance of universities. The force is not only allowed on campus but empowered to arrest those deemed troublemakers by the authorities. It is answerable to the Hellenic Police rather than to the education institutions they patrol. Since 2019 there have been around 45 police operations in occupied university premises.

These moves built on the abolition in 2011 of the Academic Asylum law by the social democratic PASOK government.

The 1982 law, under which police could only enter university campuses with permission, and which guaranteed students sanctuary from arrest or state brutality, was born from the bloody legacy of the junta. It was enacted in response to popular anger over the brutal state murder of students who took part in the uprising at the Polytechnic in Athens on November 17, 1973. On that day students had launched strike action under the slogan

of “bread, education, freedom” against the military, which had taken power in 1967.

In November 2011, Lucas Papademos’s coalition government—including PASOK, ND and the far-right Popular Orthodox Rally—authorised police entry into a public university, at Thessaloniki, for the first time since 1982.

The abolition of the 1982 law was demanded by the United States. Among the huge haul of diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks in 2010 was one from Daniel V. Speckhard, then US ambassador in Athens. Calling for its scrapping, Speckhard described the law as “nothing more than a legal cover for hoodlums to wreak destruction with impunity.”

Syriza is duplicitous. Its 36 deputies voted against the new university legislation, but its new leader, Stefanos Kasselakis—a former trader at Goldman Sachs in the US as well as the owner of several shipping companies—has been a long-time advocate of private universities operating in Greece.

Kasselakis wrote a series of anti-working-class screeds for the right-wing Greek-American *National Herald* newspaper between 2007 and 2015. In 2007, he expressed support for the attempts of Karamanlis to establish private universities. These proposals were also shelved in the face of massive student opposition.

Attacking PASOK for opposing the measures after having initially supported them, Kasselakis wrote, “If [PASOK] had the political courage to support the change, with which [it] initially agreed, students would still have been beaten up by the riot police, but at least the state of education would have been radically challenged and would have changed.”

Students, youth, academics, and the entire working class must take stock of the situation. The lurch of the ruling class, and its political parties, including Syriza, to the right must be answered by a politically independent movement of the working class and youth. Fighters for that movement must base themselves on the record of political struggle set down by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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