

Fighting neoliberal university reform

Huge student movement in Greece

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20,000 students at the largest student march in the past 20 years surge through downtown Athens on June 8th. 1,200 students of the School of Economics voted in favor of continuing the occupation of the university in a count that took place in 3 lecture halls! 2,000 students in the jam-packed central lecture hall at the University of Macedonia. 1,500 vote in favor of the occupation, even though the forces of the left that support the framework (platform) of the Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee of the Occupations are very weak there! 790 vote in favor of the occupation in the Philosophy Department in Athens out of 1,200 taking part in the assembly, in a department where up till today, the vote at assemblies was won by the student faction of the Communist Party, which this time by going against the occupation, experienced a bitter loss. This picture of the sensational participation of students and the overwhelming support of the proposals for mobilizations with occupations of departments is evident everywhere.

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It is possibly the largest movement of student occupations ever in Greece and which, at present time, is constantly accelerating, surpassing not only the most optimistic estimates, but also any imagination! 57 departments occupied during the first week of mobilizations, 83 the next... 330 after four weeks, when the total number of university departments in the country is 447.

The wave of occupations and demonstrations is, for the first time in the history of the student movement in the country, proportionately greater in the provinces than in the capital.

Massive student demonstrations take place on all the campuses in Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki, Crete, Yannina in northwestern Greece, Xanthi in northeastern Greece and elsewhere).

The government responded with suppression of the student demonstrations on June 1st. The special police forces brutally attacked the students a week later during the national demonstration on June 8th.

However, this suppression did not have the desired results. Student assemblies are growing in number continuously. It is an impressive resistance movement, which is proportionate to the

magnitude of the government attack.

Government attack

The Minister of Education of the New Democracy (rightwing) government announced that she would bring in for vote a draft law concerning tertiary education during the summer session of the Greek Parliament with the expectation that during summer there would be limited reactions. However, she did not take the dynamics of the movement into account. The students' response was immediate because this draft law threatens the rights of tens of thousands of students, as well as the overall conditions of study at universities. In particular it incorporates the following:

- Refusal to renew the enrolment of students who do not pass their courses within one and a half years after the completion of the period of 4-7 years depending on the department. Refusal to renew enrolment of students who wish to re-sit exams after a certain number of failures. The government demagoguery claims that in this way they will do away with the phenomenon of "life-long students", which in the collective fantasy is identified with "left-wing student agitators". In reality, a large proportion of students complete their studies after a longer period of time than what is foreseen by the draft law. In several departments, it is the average duration of study! The experience of the daily problems that students, most of whom have no participation in left-wing political activities, face during their effort to complete their studies has brought them to the assemblies in masses. In particular, it is the students who come from poorer social strata or who work who are threatened most immediately.
- Revocation of the free distribution of textbooks. As the above measure, this one affects the financially weak and raises even greater class barriers within the university.
- Restriction of university asylum. This is one of the greatest conquests of the student movement. Today, students have the right to veto the decisions of the academic authorities, within whose jurisdiction suspension of asylum lies. The government wants to abolish all student control of asylum, in order for police forces and surveillance cameras to invade campuses.

These measures go in hand with the procedure of constitutional amendment, which has been set in motion aiming at the establishment of private universities. Article 16 of the Greek Constitution of 1975 states that the character of tertiary education is exclusively "public and free of charge". Any attempt to establish non-state universities is unconstitutional.

A constitutional amendment, however, is a prolonged procedure, which lasts over the duration of two parliamentary sessions (two governments in effect) and requires a reinforced majority in parliament.

Today, however, it is possible! PASOK (socialdemocrats) abandoning their stable stance of their party supporting public and free education has created an unprecedented consent for the amendment of Article 16 which is also indicative of the degree to which PASOK has adopted "social liberal" policies. The degeneration of social-democracy appears even greater in the stance of the leadership of the General Confederation of Greek Workers, which is controlled by PASOK. It has submitted candidacy for the creation of one of the first "non-state" universities!

A first set of measures were already passed by the government last year. The law for the "assessment of departments" created an institutional framework in concordance with the course of the Bologna procedure. Taking all this into consideration, we can safely support that the present law decisively advances the privatization of tertiary education.

It prepares the conditions with which both the state universities and future private universities will function entirely under conditions of competition and will be subordinate to corporations.

Autocracy, intensification of studies and rejection of the “superfluous” student force is a prerequisite for that type of university, in which political freedom and social sensitivities have no place.

A decisive clash

There can be no doubt about the significance of this movement. It is a face on confrontation in which the defeat of the struggle will possibly be - with no exaggeration - “swan song” of the radical student movement in Greece, as we knew it.

The student movement - from the renowned “rebellion of the Polytechnic” in November of 1973 against the junta of the Colonels, and through the occupations of campuses lasting for 1.5 years in the years of 1978-79, up to the great movement of occupations which caused a huge political crisis within the right-wing government during the period 1990-91 reaching today’s struggles - constituted the “unpredictable factor” in the social struggles within a country where the forces of social-democracy and Stalinism dominate oppressively over the labor movement.

The universities were a unique source of radicalization and a social reservoir for the revolutionary left in Greece. If this government reform prevails, the radical youth movement in the universities will lose its rank and file. If the government is defeated, we can foresee a new rise in radicalization among students.

The university lecturers’ strike

The government’s draft law aroused unprecedented reactions among the university lecturers, since it mainly affects the lower level lecturers. The Pan-Hellenic federation of lecturers declared an all-out strike, which widened the front against the government. Their mobilization facilitated the students’ struggle in another way: with the lecturers’ strike, the argument against the occupations (in order not to lose the exam period) became even more unconvincing. The lecturers, in most cases, participate in the student demonstrations.

Political Forces

(In an article published in International Viewpoint 379 - June 2006, comrade Stathis Kouvelakis gives an objective and exact picture of the political forces and the election percentages in the student elections so we won’t repeat those facts here).

This movement has surpassed all the political forces that are active in the student movement.

Through the struggle, thousands of students, who until recently were hostile to “politics”, today are discovering the value of joint action and “grassroots politics”. The spontaneous participation inflated the movement and broke the impenetrability of student factions and organizations. However, there is always a dialectic of the spontaneous - conscientious. Not all political forces were ready to the same extent to develop their activities within this uprising.

The forces of EAAK (United Independent Anti-capitalist Movement), within the ranks of which the main bulk of the anti-capitalist left in the universities participates in the struggles (and in which the

activists of the 4th International participate), moved in the beginning with greater ease with the current of the movement. That is because EAAK was born from a similar movement (that of 1990-91) and was integrally linked to all the later movements and occupations of universities (1995, 1998 and 2001) up to present time.

EAAK is the main political expression of the movement and plays a predominant role in the Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee of Occupied Departments. The rest of the forces, most of the time, support the proposals EAAK makes. Nevertheless, a prerequisite for EAAK to play this role was for it to abandon any sectarian complexes which accompany its political practice most of the time. It calls upon the PKS (Communist Party) for unity and votes along with DARAS (Synaspismos) and Genoa 2001 (SEK) and in many cases along with PASP (the student faction of PASOK), something which a few months before would have been considered almost treason.

EAAK, through experience, reached the conclusion that without the unity of all of the forces, the movement would be inconceivable.

The forces of the Communist Party of Greece (???), on the other hand, acted essentially against the movement. During the three first weeks, the ??? was scaremongering about students' losing the exam period and was calling on students to continue the struggle in September! Through "Rizospastis" (???’s official newspaper) they slandered the left constituents of the movement claiming that they "were playing the game of PASOK" and denied its mass appeal.

It hid behind its so-called "Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee", which at first had the support of only seven departments, to be left eventually with only 1! Wherever PKS (the student faction) exerted its influence to gather support in the assemblies, it met with huge losses in favor of the framework supported by the Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee of Occupied Departments.

In the fourth week of the movement, under great pressure from the mass movement which brought the CCG to the verge of total isolation, it recognized that "the struggle is escalating" only to propose its own framework of five-day occupations separate from the more militant proposals put forward by the Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee of Occupied Departments. In other words, it continues its divisive policies. In all the assemblies, however, once more the CCG foundered in the voting procedure.

DAP, the student faction of the governing right-wing government, with the majority of votes in the student elections, is totally isolated from the assemblies. While during previous movements, it achieved the mass mobilization of its supporters against occupations, for the time being, it is unable to accomplish that now. Even in departments where it has the great majority of votes in student elections, it hasn't been able to stand against the sweeping current of the movement.

Whereas in previous years, PASP the PASOK student faction, increasingly aligned itself with DAP, it has now split into many parts and disappeared within the movement. This fact reflects what is taking place within its social base. As long as the movement is growing, in most departments the members of PASP support the occupations in defiance of the official position of their party.

DARAS (Synaspismos' student faction) supports the occupations, playing a positive role in the movement but is shadowed by the EAAK.

Forms of organization

The Greek student movement has several historical particularities which differentiate it from the

student movements in other countries.

Firstly, for the past 12 years there has been no functioning National Student Union of Greece (EFEE, the Greek equivalent of French UNEF). It convenes, in name only, to announce the student elections and then sinks into oblivion again.

On the one hand, the anti-capitalist left sabotaged every effort for the reconstruction of the EFEE from the point that the right-wing DAP threatened to gain control of it. On the other hand, all the other student factions more or less accepted this situation to further their own political aims. The absence of an official bureaucratic apparatus facilitates mobilizations. They have no bureaucratic leadership to overcome!

There is no bureaucratic student structure to present itself as the official interlocutor with the government. Only the decisions of the assemblies legitimize any form of mobilization.

Another difference with that of student movements in other countries is that in the assemblies, the students don't vote for specific proposals one by one, but integrated frameworks proposed by various factions.

Whenever a decision is made in favor of occupying a university department, a Coordinating Committee for the Occupation is created. This is not made up of elected and revocable members, but it is "open" to all. It is logical that this model will have advantages but also serious disadvantages. Its basic characteristic is that everything depends on the balance of forces between the political organizations in the Coordinating Committees.

This model was confirmed throughout this movement also. With the difference that this time it has been expanded. Coordinating Committees exist in each city and there is also a Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee of Occupied Departments. The greatest problem is that the Coordinating Committee risks being cut off from the assemblies and the limits of its actions, as we will see further down, are the limits of the forces of the radical left which prevail in it.

The French example

No other external incentive, no other "example to follow" has had the repercussions on the Greek student movement that the struggle of the French youth against the law concerning the CPE (Contract of First Employment). The victorious outcome of the struggle in France gives an immense boost to the movement and is a universal point of reference.

The lesson from France is simple: we can win. But the significance of international solidarity with the French movement doesn't stop here. Even a small scale solidarity protest which took place in Paris in support of the students' struggle in Greece was received with enthusiasm in the departmental assemblies. Solidarity statements (such as the ones from our comrade Olivier Besancenot and from JCR which were read at the Pan-Hellenic student rally on June 8th) and symbolic protests by the youth movement in France (and in other countries) have greater significance than usual.

Governmental intransigence and suppression

The Minister of Education, Marietta Giannakou, categorically refuses to enter into discussions with representative of the students. She characterizes students and lecturers both as "minorities who are

reacting to the modernization of the Greek university". The government hasn't limited itself to intransigence: it has launched a wave of suppression culminating in the barbaric and brutal attack during the mass student march on June 8th with the intent of intimidating the youths who are inexperienced as far as struggles are concerned.

The march split up. The forces of suppression struck the student bloc indiscriminately, boys and girls between 18 and 21 years old in most cases. Police from the special forces, armed to the teeth isolated students in groups and beat them till they were unconscious.

The police attack is considered to be the most brutal in recent years (dozens injured!) and was accompanied by 40 arrests (in the following days detainees were set free under the pressure of the general outcry).

Even reporters from establishment mass media were struck. Pictures of bleeding students filled the television news bulletins counter-balancing the usual pictures of black bloc.

Between three and four thousand students took refuge within the Polytechnic University after the demonstration. In this way, they made the best use of academic asylum, confirming the significance of the struggle to defend it.

Breaking the social isolation

The suppression on June 8th turned the movement into the topic of the day. Until then, the government tried to impose a conspiracy of silence over the mass media and particularly over television.

PASOK, which essentially assents to the government measures, speaks of the need for dialogue and is beginning half-heartedly to differentiate its stance. The parliamentary parties of the left reject the draft law but do not take serious unifying initiatives to support the student movement.

An even greater obstacle is the stance of the leadership of the General Confederation of Greek Workers, which, as stated above, not only did not move in the direction of supporting the student demands, but also supports the establishment of "non-state" universities.

As far as we know, in France, the CGT, which at first was in favor the European Constitution, changed its position under the pressure of its rank and file.

We also know that in the movement against the CPE, the large trade union federations were at first unwilling to mobilize. If they didn't manage to adopt the slogan for a permanent strike, nevertheless, under pressure from the youth, they organized strike mobilizations and took to the streets along with it. That gave breadth and credibility to the movement.

Comrades of the Fourth International, along with a few other tendencies within the movement, are supporting the point of view within the Coordinating Committees that the Pan-Hellenic Coordinating Committee itself should address the workers' movement and exert pressure on it.

However, the currents of the radical left - mainly within EAAK which, in a way, has found itself in the leadership of the movement - do not fully realize the significance of this duty and use as an excuse the truly unacceptable stance of the trade union bureaucracy.

In spite of this, the students cannot wait until new "pure and red" workers movement is created to ask the workers organizations to mobilize with strikes by their side. The issue of the mobilization of

the trade unions in support of the student struggles will be of vital importance within the next few weeks...

P.S.

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