

Greece: The Student Mobilizations Continue

Interview with a revolutionary student activist

Monday 26 March 2007, by [LOUKA Maria](#), [SARTZEKIS Andreas](#) (Date first published: March 2007).

“What we are seeing is an ongoing process in which the movement becomes stronger and takes on a mass character: if we take the demonstrations as a barometer, we can see today several demonstrations of 30,000 to 40,000 participants, and almost all the university departments are occupied.”

Can you explain the reason for this new mobilization?

The victory that was won last summer was in fact a tactical victory, forcing the right-wing government of Karamanlis to freeze its plan of “reform” of the universities. But in January, it returned to the attack, with the intention of modifying Article 16 of the Constitution, which guarantees the public and free character of higher education. Beyond that, the objective was, if not an attempt at privatizing the sector, at least the imposition of market logic on the university world.

So there very quickly developed a big mobilization, with occupation of universities, and its character was so massive that we won a first victory: the PASOK (the Greek Socialist Party) withdrew from the process of revision of Article 16. But just after that the government demonstrated its intransigence by proposing in parliament the draft law that had been frozen since last summer! The contents of this project concern the universities and the technological institutes: o putting in question, in a restrictive sense, the sanctuary of the university; o limiting the number of years of studies to “the number of years of the student’s course multiplied by two”; o abolition of rights, such as the right to free manuals; o introduction of rules of functioning of the universities along the lines of a workplace, with the appointment of managers.

The student movement reacted to this new attempt by Karamanlis and fought back with even more strength.

What form has this mobilization taken?

It follows on from the struggle last June: in fact the struggle has been going on for nearly a year! Whether it is against Article 16 or against the draft law, it is the same battle against the dislocation of higher education. What we are seeing is an ongoing process in which the movement becomes stronger and takes on a mass character: if we take the demonstrations as a barometer, we can see today several demonstrations of 30,000 to 40,000 participants, and almost all the university departments are occupied.

Why do you think there is such violence on the part of the police?

There has in fact been a “qualitative” leap in the level of repression: massive arrests, students being

beaten with clubs, use of tear gas against demonstrations: the government is trying in this way to terrorize the students. Since it sees a growing wave of exasperation, it is trying to use the tactic of suffocating the movement by repression, to dissuade the students from demonstrating on the streets.

But it is also trying on this occasion to implement a pilot program of repression which would be applicable against all future struggles in any social sector. It would like in this way to create the framework of an authoritarian state, against any form of struggle, so it is trying to put across the message that whoever contests its policies will find themselves confronted with the police violence that we see today.

What are the links between the movement and the trade unions?

This is the most difficult point for our movement. Let me begin, however, by underlining that POSDEP, the union of university teachers, has called an unlimited strike for the whole of the present period. In spite of that the movement remains relatively isolated: the union of primary school teachers (DOE) and the union of secondary school teachers (OLME) have conducted solidarity actions: work stoppages, two days on strike since the beginning of January, but that is not up to the level of the dynamic and of the needs of the movement. The federation of public sector unions (ADEDY) has contributed a certain amount of solidarity, but we have to note the pure and simple absence of the (single) confederation of trade unions GSEE: since the beginning of January, GSEE has not even called a work stoppage so that workers could take part in demonstrations, as has often been pointed out by critics of the bureaucratic leadership of GSEE (where PASOK has a majority). At this point, the demand of the student movement is that this mobilization should not remain isolated and that there should be an immediate call for a general strike which would ensure a perspective of victory. And so the most important priority is that the workers' movement should enter into struggle with this kind of solidarity.

Can we already draw some lessons?

Yes! First of all: we can see taking shape, in very difficult conditions, a new militant generation which, far from submitting to the government's projects, is becoming politicized and radicalized in a lasting way. This is a very positive fact, since this generation, in whatever work situation it finds itself tomorrow, will not hesitate to launch struggles!

A second lesson is what is happening within the student movement, where several currents have played a crucial role so that the mobilization could be unleashed. The radical Left, represented mainly by the EAAK tendency, has been in the front rank: by taking care to work in a coordinated way, it has succeeded in regrouping the student movement and giving the mobilization a mass character, and thanks to a united front tactic, it came to an agreement and cooperated with all the left forces who refuse the Karamanlis plan. By doing so it has succeeded in establishing a front against the policies of New Democracy (the party of the Right) in the sphere of education.

I think that we must underline the indispensable character of having a united front tactic in the movement, and also the role that the radical Left can play, on condition that it knows how to overcome its blockages inherited from the past.

What is the place of the students of OKDE-Spartakos in the movement?

We intervene within EAAK, which, in the framework of the movement, has functioned overall in a way that we can be happy with. Having said that, there have been some situations and some problems on which we have raised questions and made proposals, with the aim of improving the

intervention of the tendency. The main question for us is that of internal democracy: in reality, here and there, structures of EAAK have functioned in a way that we can call bureaucratic! That is to say that we have seen some cases where structures of EAAK have themselves taken initiatives whose effect has been to substitute for the movement. When such things happen, we criticize and we differentiate ourselves from it, and we try to act so that there is direct democracy within the movement, because that is what makes possible the involvement of everyone and control by the rank and file over the development of the movement.

What proposals for international solidarity would you make?

At this moment the question of internationalism is very important to us: we know to what extent the struggle against the First Employment Contract (CPE) strengthened our struggle in June 2006. So trade unions, organizations, sectors of the left and of the mass movement in Europe should adopt solidarity messages with the student movement and with those arrested - I would remind you that there have been very many arrests. What is also necessary is to succeed in establishing coordination between radical sectors of the student movement on a European level which would lead to concrete actions: for example, we could fix dates for common mobilizations and there could be solidarity actions in front of the Greek embassies in the capitals of Europe.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 387 - March 2007. Maria Louka was interviewed by Andreas Sartzekis in Athens, 11th March 2007.

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