

Students occupy schools across Greece to protest unsafe return to classrooms

By Robert Stevens
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High school students in several cities on the Greek mainland and islands began occupying schools last week to protest the unsafe return to classrooms.

Among the earliest schools occupied last week were in the cities of Karditsa and Agrinio. According to the director of secondary education in Karditsa, last Wednesday four of the five General Lyceums in the city, were occupied. The two Vocational Lyceum (EPAL) schools in Karditsa are also occupied by students.

On Monday, dozens more schools nationally joined the protests; by Tuesday, more than 100 schools were being occupied nationally.

Despite the resurgence of the virus in Greece this summer—fueled by the homicidal decision to let the tourist season proceed—Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' right-wing New Democracy government sent teachers and pupils back to classrooms on September 14. Over 557,516 high school students and 64,000 permanent secondary school teachers, a large part of Greece's 10 million population, are in danger. The return to school has proceeded unopposed by the trade unions and the main opposition party, Syriza-Progressive Alliance.

Within one week, this disastrous policy has let COVID-19 rip through the school system, leading to the closure of at least 59 schools. To suspend the operation of a school, at least three cases of coronavirus—of people not directly related to each other—must be identified.

This is contributing to a surge in coronavirus cases nationally, with 453 new coronavirus cases announced Monday and six deaths. On Tuesday, 346 new cases were recorded (210 of them in the most populated region, Attica) and 8 deaths. Seventy-seven patients are intubated. This brought total cases to 15,928 and deaths to 352.

The demands of students occupying high schools include limiting classroom groups to at most 15 students; for immediately hiring more teachers to fill the gaps; that

permanent cleaning staff be hired; and that cameras not be installed in schools for e-learning, as proposed by the government. At one school a banner put up by students read: "No more than 15 students per class, Give money to education, We are not expendable!"

The government is letting teaching proceed based on maximum class sizes of 25 for primary schools and the last class of secondary school. For other secondary school classes, the maximum size is 27. These numbers are routinely breached. *Efimerida Ton Syntakton* reported earlier this month that the Education Ministry's own figures showed 52 percent of all primary and secondary school students are in classes of over 21 pupils. Classes of 30 and 31 were also reported.

It added that 74 percent of all students (1 million out of 1.35 million) are in classes with more than 18 students; 52 percent (700,000 students) are in classes with more than 21 students.

This week, students in more than 40 schools in Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city, occupied their classrooms. They were joined by students at schools in Serres and Sidirokastro with gymnasiums pupils joining at N. Petritsi and Lefkonas after a call was made online. ERT reported that junior high students joined their older schoolmates at the Sidirokastro Lyceum. Juniors at N. Petritsi and Lefkonas also joined the protests, reported *Protothema*.

Schools are occupied in Volos, Nea Ionia, Agrinio, Kavala and Achaia. In the Achaia area, 39 schools were under occupation Monday, as students marched through the capital, Patra.

In the Ilia region of Western Greece, three schools occupied on Monday were soon joined by more with 13 occupied Tuesday morning in the capital, Pyrgos, and at least four other areas.

Occupations broke out in dozens of schools in Crete, Greece's largest island. Occupations are underway in

schools in the capital, Heraklion, with 14 schools affected as of Tuesday, and in schools in Chania and Rethymno. In Chania at least nine schools were hit, including every year group at two schools, the General Lyceum and the High School.

The independent news site *Press Project* reported that the dire state of education in Thessaloniki has intensified the protests. Hundreds of students there must study in school basements in unventilated rooms.

In the High School of Kordelio, located alongside a primary school, students are being forced to study in the school yard, as two rooms in the school's basement are deemed unsuitable.

Throughout the EPAL system and in most of western Thessaloniki's gymnasiums and lyceums, class sizes range from 25 to 27.

School students are not only crammed into classrooms upon arrival, but also have to travel long distances, sometimes by bus—giving the virus more opportunities to spread. Children unable to enrol at the EPAL Evosmos school were sent to Kordelio by bus. At EPAL Stavroupolis, 1,200 students in overcrowded classes must sit together in the courtyard.

Press Project reported, “In Diavata, regardless of whether students go to a vocational high school (EPAL) or a general high school (GEL), they have to wake up two hours in advance and cram themselves like sardines on the bus alongside workers who at that time are travelling to work in local factories. This is because the closest schools are one or two villages away” from Diviata.

At another school, EPAL Ampelokipi, there is just one cleaner employed for the entire school in the middle of a pandemic.

Some are also protesting the mandatory use of masks. While there have been protests, in Greece as elsewhere, of a small, disoriented section of the population opposed to masks, students are mainly opposing them on the basis that wearing a mask—in and of itself—is not enough to protect them in overcrowded, dilapidated, unventilated schools.

The *Tovima* newspaper cited a second year high school student involved in an occupation who said, “We believe the use of masks does not have the desired effect if appropriate infrastructure and measures are not in place.”

Moreover, the free masks provided by the state are of poor quality, forcing parents to buy masks for their children. To wear what were dubbed “parachute masks,” children have to cut holes for their eyes through the masks. Greek Deputy Health Minister Vassilis

Kontozamanis said a resulting supply of 500,000 unusable masks the state bought at taxpayer expense arose from a “misunderstanding between the government and the contractor.”

The government is responding to the occupations with repression. On Monday, juvenile prosecutor Dimitra Tsiardakli filed an order for police to prevent the disruption of public services by targeting occupied schools in Thessaloniki prefecture.

The order was sent to Thessaloniki's General Police Directorate and to local police stations. In order to keep teachers and parents from backing the protests, police were also authorized to apply the same penalties to them as to students.

Early Tuesday, a motorcycle police unit arrested 12 pupils at a school in Karatsini in the Piraeus areas of Attica, near Athens. The order for the arrest reportedly came from central police headquarters. The children were only released after their parents were called to the police station.

Yesterday, *Efimerida Ton Syntakton* reported that the arrests in Piraeus had led to “strong reactions, as a similar event took place in Crete: there were complaints that uniformed officers demanded school principals in Heraklion hand over the names of students taking part in school occupations.”

These nationwide protests in Greece are unfolding amid rising anger internationally among youth and workers at the back-to-school drive organised by capitalist governments. There is explosive opposition in every country that is waiting to erupt. The necessary step forward for students, educators and parents in Greece and beyond is to form independent organisations of struggle, joining the global network of Educator Rank-and-File Safety Committees that have emerged in the United States, Germany, the UK and Australia.

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