

700 Greek schools occupied by students protesting unsafe return to classes

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School students in Greece have escalated their protest against the unsafe reopening of schools, with 700 schools across 35 towns and cities under occupation as of yesterday.

Following last week's marches and rallies, protests will go ahead again tomorrow in Athens, and in Greece's second largest city, Thessaloniki, and other towns and cities. Demonstrations are taking place on Greece island's including Crete and Rhodes.

The school occupations have been underway for more than a week. Last Friday, the number of occupations reached more than 200 and then soared to their current number—with 250 in Greece's most populated region, Attica. Given that it is mainly secondary education impacted, more than one in five of the country's 3,168 high schools have been occupied.

Yesterday Greece reported another 416 new cases of coronavirus—the second highest total recorded in a 24-hour period—and five fatalities. Coronavirus is spreading like wildfire throughout the education system, following the decisions of the Conservative New Democracy government to reopen the economy, including the tourist sector, followed by schools (from September 14) and universities this term. As of Tuesday, 150 schools had been forced to close departments or close entirely due to infections.

Virtually no safety measures were put in place in schools to stop students and staff being infected. By September 23—just eight days after schools returned—50 students, 16 teachers, and one support worker had been tested positive, with the true figure undoubtedly much higher.

The occupations are demanding the limiting of classroom groups to at most 15 students, hiring more teachers to fill the gaps—especially as Greece has lost 20,000 education staff after a decade of savage

austerity in which the education budget was slashed 27 percent, more permanent cleaning staff, and that cameras are not installed in schools for e-learning, as proposed by the government.

In fighting for their demands, students are demanding that the government cuts spending on Greece's military and fund schools, and health care.

The call supporting the occupations by the Athens Students Co-Ordinating Committee read in part, “We as students have proved with our stance that the reasons for which we are mobilising are serious. We have made the problems we face in our schools known everywhere! We faced the slander and misrepresentation of our struggle by being portrayed as ‘the movement of nothing’, as ‘student anti-maskers’, they said ‘they are doing it to skip lessons’ all the usual things. Now they are telling us that our protest actions are public health time-bombs. **SCHOOLS ARE PUBLIC HEALTH TIME-BOMBS!** We are fighting **SO THAT THEY ARE NOT**, by wearing our mask and practising social distancing... And this is what is driving us onto the streets.”

“This week they [the government] gave 2 million euros to TV channels so they produce TV spots on the pandemic. Why are they saying that in our case they can't even hire one more cleaner in every school? Why are they not giving us a single euro?

“They were annoyed when we told them that we don't like our parents' taxes not going to education but to armaments! They asked how we know about such things. What do they want? For students to like their country taking part in war operations in which children are killed?”

The occupations are being widely supported on social media. A picture posted on the Greek Covid19 Solidarity Campaign Facebook page shows a message

from a group, Menoume Energoi (We are staying active). The group highlights issues about the spread of Covid-19 and have campaigned over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). They sent greetings to students occupying the lyceum in the rural town of Rizomata in the Imathia prefecture in Northern Greece. The banner of the students on the school fence reads, "In one corner of Mars they found water while for one month [our school] has been looking for a physics teacher".

Menoume Energoi states, "At the lyceum in question the students are asking for a physics and English teacher to be finally hired and for the provision of free Covid tests, given that the husband of one of their teachers tested positive for coronavirus and so it is possible that she has also been infected."

Kyriakos Mitsotakis' government was venomous in its denunciations of the occupations this week, after sending police squads to a number of schools last week—arresting pupils at one—and threatening parents and teachers who backed them. Anastasia Gika, Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, denounced the occupations declaring, "It's an illegal act to take over a public building. It's the worst thing one could do given that schools remained closed during the previous months as well due to the coronavirus."

Constantinos Bodganos, an ND deputy who has consistently made overtures to the far-right, referred to students' occupying schools as "snakes" in a twitter post which also provocatively portrays them as monkeys.

Referring to national school occupations in the 1990s, he declared, "Those who were involved in school occupations from my generation led us to a new national divide, an additional 100 billion in debt, national defeat on the Macedonian issue, forced settlement [of migrants] and causing havoc in protests with impunity. I'm sorry, but it seems that we haven't understood what sort of snake we are tolerating in the bosom of our schools."

In an interview on *Mega Channel* yesterday, Bodganos doubled down on attacking students, stating, "Occupations are destroying school infrastructure and are consolidating a culture of impunity, bullying and lawlessness." He threatened that "Occupations [are illegal under criminal law]. The government has delayed." Referring to possible judicial moves against

schoolchildren, he demanded, "The occupations must be broken up by legal means if necessary."

Education Minister Niki Kerameus told *ANTI TV* on Monday that her government would consider negotiations over the students demands, but insisted, "Talks will only be held with open schools. Nobody can deny to someone else the right to learn and to disrupt the education process."

Thursday's protest is being backed by the Federation of Secondary School Teachers (OLME) trade union, who have called a partial strike from 11am until 2pm so their members can attend the protests. OLME's president is an official of the ruling New Democracy party's trade union wing, the Democratic Independent Workers' Movement (DAKE).

OLME's declaration in support of the protest was necessitated by growing opposing by teachers and other school staff. But OLME's real position is that schools must remain open. The involvement of teachers in the protests follows last week's strikes by doctors and transport workers, pointing to the spread of social opposition among workers whose social position has been devastated by a decades of austerity.

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