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Greece

Reactionary school law passed in Greece, but the fight continues

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There was little suspense: the right-wing majority of the Greek parliament voted on Thursday, 11 June for the reactionary law on schools, confirming if it was necessary the dangerous nature of a government whose sole intent is to break up the public services to better offer them to the private sector, preferably to cronies, as evidenced in recent times by a series of scandals of which one alone would have been enough to bring down such a government in other times!

We discuss here the two axes of the right's offensive against state schooling and its staff. First the terrifying imposition of a device introducing cameras in classrooms, to continue to offer lessons to absent students, and this in the name of equal opportunities obviously. Without falling into the trap, despite illusions on the left about the alleged benefits of distance education, teachers and many students demanded the withdrawal of this device, and the ultra-conservative Minister of Education, Niki Kerameos, was thus nicknamed Cameraos in the demonstrations. The anger was so strong that there was a U-turn, in words at least: this device would be offered only under certain specific conditions, there would be no camera but lightweight devices. These reversals were obtained by the movement: 91% of teachers say they are against recording and broadcasting courses, for 81% the objective is the control of teachers, and 62% believe that this measure is in the service of private interests! Nevertheless, the device, adopted as an amendment in the context of an unrelated law, now exists, and given the "Orbanesque" style of the right in power, it poses a threat to educational freedom but also to democratic rights in the face of the use of data: during "distance courses", teachers' data were communicated to a private company by a department of the ministry.

Social selection and permanent control

Pedagogical freedoms are more generally attacked in the second axis of the offensive, a law concocted during lockdown but coming as no surprise to teachers in view of what Kerameos had announced last summer. Let us recall its very violent characteristics: very strong deepening of social selection, with the aim of limiting access to university, pushing technical students towards short term private training, establishment of competition between institutions, with the ultimate goal being to close a number of the latter (hence the interest in "distance learning"), with the threat, for tens of thousands of substitute teachers, of no longer being able to find posts in the near future.

A key device is the evaluation of teachers and institutions, a measure that the Greek bourgeoisie has been trying to impose for years, each time coming up against the resistance of staff. And, as a symbol of the perfectly reactionary reality of capitalism under Koulis (the nickname of the Prime Minister, a member of a family of very right wing politicians which operates in the manner of a clan), control is exerted not only over teachers but also students, by establishing permanent cramming (exams for all classes) but also by a noting of behaviour which will appear on the Apolytirion leaving certificate: a beautiful illustration of the famous "skills" demanded by employers' organisation, the SEV.

Employers in heaven

The employers thus obtained what they have wanted for a long time: a school under orders (and without critical spirit, with for example the disappearance of sociology, replaced by Latin for the university entrance examination), but also granting favours to private institutions - the association of private school owners is the only structure to have

approved the bill, with the private teachers' union fully participating in the mobilizations against Kerameos. But other private sectors are rubbing their hands, such as the vampire-like "frontistiria" crammer evening classes that have existed for a very long time. And the law also opens the door to questioning article 16 of the Constitution, which guarantees free education: lessons in foreign languages will now be allowed for the first years of university, with paid registration.

Failure of the mobilization?

When we see everything that the law entails, we are tempted to speak of a great victory for the right, and therefore of the failure of the mobilization. Fortunately, however, things are more complex. Kerameos took advantage of the lockdown to table her law, concocted without any negotiation but presented as the fruit of broad consultation. The goal was, we suspect, to avoid any mobilization, especially as the tendency currently governing the (only) secondary school union, OLME, is linked to the government right. However, even in full lockdown, mobilization has greatly developed, with demonstrations called by OLME, DOE (a primary school union), OIELE (private teachers), parents of students, and also high school students. Following the big demonstrations of 13 May, other demonstrations have taken place, called by the same organizations and each time attracting between 6,000 and 8,000 demonstrators in Athens, with also on 9 May a 24-hour strike in secondary education. Given the circumstances, we can only speak of successful mobilizations, especially since they were generally quite combative! The few concession from Kerameos (on cameras and on an age limit for entering technical college, for example) were obtained by the force of the movement, which the government did not seem to expect.

Union strategies

The problem is therefore elsewhere, and it is twofold: first, given the period, the movement did not succeed in broadening, a prolonged strike did not seem very credible in this difficult phase and, suddenly, we had instead a repetition of demonstrations which were certainly broad, but not of a magnitude to make the right yield. And what was also visibly lacking was overall cohesion which could advance the conviction that it was possible to prevent the law from being passed. The reformist union leaderships (or even those linked to the right) did nothing more or less than pursue other mobilizations, calling for protests to the end: the minimum expected from a national trade union leadership, without having to openly betray the movement as all currents of OLME had done in 2013, from the right to Syriza, except the radical left. The trade union current of the KKE (Communist Party), PAME, seems to have had the objective of appearing with many flags, like a force which counts, but without the will to push beyond. Ditto for the Communist Youth, combative, but without perspective.

As far as the currents of the radical and revolutionary left are concerned, apart from the "classic" fragmentation, we could see as a strong tendency to the denunciation of the union leaderships, those of the "government-employer union majorities of DOE and OLME". [1] The objective being, for some, autonomous initiatives from the rank and file unions: "It is necessary to build a new combative trade union force which puts forward the immediate problems of the workers and their demands and which links them solidly to another path on which the country must engage in the interests of workers". [2] This closely resembles the approach of PAME, promoted by the very sectarian KKE, rather than that, shared and practiced by many during the movement, of activating the rank and file structures of the DOE and OLME unions, knowing that it was their strength that led the national leaderships to call for demonstrations.

The challenge of youth mobilization

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This is a very important debate in the near future for struggles in Greece! But already, we can only agree with Argyris Papathanasiou, a member of the radical tendency (Paremvasis, Kinisis, Syspirosis) in DOE, interviewed in *Prin* on 14 June: "From today, the Education movement fights for the repeal of this law, as on numerous occasions in the past it succeeded in cancelling in practice laws which had been voted through". And among the priorities: blocking the transfer of students to prevent the increase in the number of students per class and ensure the maintenance of the number of positions; cancelling the self-evaluation of institutions; and an increase in salaries and the number of permanent positions.

But what will be decisive for the coming months will be a massive participation of young people in schools, the main victim of the Kerameos law which offers them only submission and unemployment. Present on the demonstrations, although limited in numbers, and also present in the recent anti-racist demonstrations, their mobilization to reject an ever darker future and to link up with the teaching mobilizations is determinant in defeating Ms. Caméraos and the government.

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[1] *Prin*, newspaper of the NAR (New Left Current), 7 June.

[2] Extract from the call for a demonstration in Athens on 23 June by rank and file unions in the public and private sector, *Prin*, 14 June.