

A heavy burden on young shoulders

"It's not books, nor high marks. What we lack is life"

The educational law 2525 laid the foundations of the enterprise school which seems to be the future type of what we used to know until now as elementary and secondary education. If we go only 8 years back, in the early 90's, we will find out that a similar law was under way. Some of its provisions the right wing government tried to pass then (leaving the fundamental ones temporarily aside) aimed at restoring discipline at state schools through uniforms, morning prayers, a point-system evaluation and a decrease in the number of absences from classes allowed. A vigorous school occupation movement followed which, to some extent, had the silent support of the socialist party. Soon the provisions were taken back, the minister of Education retired and no government had dared to impose large-scale reforms until 1997.

The question therefore is what has changed in the meantime in the Greek society and the Greek educational system in particular. So, let's try to explain things a little. The Greek version of the mass democratic school, was developed in the late 70's and the 80's, during the short period of social democracy and recuperation of the popular and working class demands. This easier access to secondary school to workers' and peasants' children (who were formerly excluded from higher education) had as its ideological banner the slogan of "equal opportunities". Mass consumption of education became the vehicle for social mobility, since education played a semi-egalitarian role. Before long school (both the secondary one and the university) was turned into a field of social conflicts, competition, great expectations and contradictions.

The democratization of education caused a mass production of prospects (and a corresponding rise in civil servant and petit-bourgeois strata in the 70's and the 80's, e.g. in 1982 68,7 % of university graduates worked in the public sector); gradually the initially homogenized mass of students turned into individualized users/consumers of education. Frontistiria (crammer schools, a sort of private tuition -individual or in group) is a Greek originality indicative of the dominant petit-bourgeois mentality and an increasing demand in education: 97% of students spend 2-6 hours a day attending these supplementary schools that "coach" them for a successful schooling, which in their minds is always meant as entrance to the university. The average cost of private tuition per family with a student in upper high school equals a basic salary.

However, the rise in unemployment in the early 90's as well as the explosion of individualist ambitions brought about a crisis in social reproduction, a crisis in the selective, allocating role of education. It was a crisis in the hierarchical division of labour (especially because of the out of any proportion increase of university graduates) and a

crisis of discipline and meaning in school, a crisis of legitimacy in other words that had hit state education. Capital tried to deal with it imposing law 2525.

The first opposition to the law was the June movement. On the surface, this battle could be seen as one against the abolition of the teachers' list of seniority. Until recently, teachers (both of secondary and primary schools) would finish their studies and enroll in a list of seniority waiting to get appointed. Gradually, both their large numbers and the state's austerity cuts in education inflated the list so much that the average teacher had to wait for about a decade until she/he could get appointed. The list of seniority was one of the last institutions reminding of the social democratic state's "obligation" to provide a guaranteed occupation. Supposedly it recognised equal degrees for equal labour rights, however the thousands of unemployed (unappointed) teachers was a proof of the contrary. The examination for teachers' hiring in its place tempted many, mainly young, unemployed or temporarily working graduates, who fell prey to the capitalist ideology of meritocracy.

The June movement was best succeeded by the secondary schools occupation movement. This movement showed up law 2525, more than the June one did, since its target, the new student evaluation methods in upper high school, constitutes the hard core of the law. It also opposed competition, rat race, lack of meaning, the tyranny of over-work, students' expulsion from school through an increase in exams, their division into "worthy" and "unworthy" ones. In an indirect way it brought up the bleak future of unemployment, insecurity and exploitation. However, the question of wage slavery and its close relation to education were not treated with the importance they deserved. So, inevitably, the arguments and demands (apart from the dominant and general slogan of "down with the law 2525") focused on the question of exams and they were expressed in several variations: a temporary suspension of the exams of the 2nd grade of upper high school for this year, or their abolition or the decrease of the subjects examined etc. Similarly to the June movement this movement lacked a verbal clarity of demands and an emancipatory speech corresponding to its praxis. That's why, both movements flirted with the traditional social democratic slogans of the left and used them as patches to cover their lack in imaginative speech. Contradictory images of rebel adolescents shooting flares and throwing stones at cops while at the same time they were chanting boring slogans like "we want a 12-year compulsory state education" were a usual phenomenon in the demos. Some other slogans were clearly hooliganistic, other full of sexual connotations, other pure swears against the prime minister. The suppressed imagination and the inability to put fresh ideas in words, which let the social-democratic slogans dominate, got their revenge in the streets; demos became more and more lively and violent: drums, fireworks, scarecrows or donkeys as symbols of the minister of education, eggs, vegetables, yogurt, oranges, bottles and molotov cocktails, all became munitions of a war poor in words but rich in feeling. Road blocks became fields of spontaneity and violent conflicts between students and pathetic drivers: often, those of them who would hit students and run away in their "indignation" proved to be members of the Socialist Party. Students did not remain inactive when being attacked by angry drivers but would often throw eggs or stones against them. They were cordial with sympathetic drivers and would play football or sit on armchairs reclaiming the streets for hours.

The teachers' role in the students' rebellion was rather ambiguous. Most of them remained passive hoping secretly for the abolition of the law through the student movement. Quite few of them participated actively in the struggle helping students protect themselves from parents', public prosecutors' and ministry's coordinated actions. The crisis of legitimacy secondary school suffers from has not left teachers' prestige untouched: the former humanistic and "progressive" veneer of the vocation has faded away, blurred by contradictory criticisms of laziness, incompetence, authoritarianism and unaccountability. It has thus given way to a growing professionalism among teachers aspiring to an improvement of their role through the imposition of law 2525. More concretely, some of them, longing for new career opportunities, believe that stricter selection of students and teachers' assessment will help things settle into shape: they themselves will get promoted teaching the "worthy" students, while the mass of "useless" teachers and "illiterate" students will get kicked out.

Parents' role on the other hand did not seem less perplexing. In relation to their attitude towards the movement they can be divided into two categories: those of them who are members of the ruling Socialist Party and the rest. The former supported half-heartedly their children in the beginning, letting their fears for their future prevail over their loyalty to the party. However, after Christmas, when the movement became more violent they showed their preference: some of them would attack occupied schools and students physically, break up their assemblies, call the cops or hire private security to guard schools, bring charges against students, run over them at road blocks or attack those few teachers, parents or others who supported students. However, whether Socialist party members or not the vast majority of parents accept their children's future job insecurity as an "unavoidable fact" because they themselves as workers have been defeated in this decade. They would be eager to pay more and more for supplementary private tuition but would not tolerate their children rebel against the enterprise school and thus indirectly against the misery of unemployment and flexibility.

It is tempting here to attempt a comparison: while parents in the early 90's supported their children in the then occupation movement against some minor provisions of a draft of law while the ones assumedly similar to the law 2525 never made it to put into practice, nowadays they seem to have minimized their petit-bourgeois dreams for their children's career and submit to capital's dictates.

In the early 90's there was a feeling of uncertainty about the future of state, free education, jobs and rights in general but as long as struggles were not as isolated as they are nowadays and were therefore victorious (although not always as radical as the present ones) hope materialized in active solidarity. That's true of course not only for parents but for all proletarians in general. Except for a tiny minority (mainly young people, students and teachers who were involved in the June movement) the majority of the proles just watched the student movement on the telly. Most of them passive, would smile awkwardly at students' slogans and liveliness at demos or road blocks (when not angered because trapped in traffic) but would finally shake their heads in disapproval and mistrust of their possibilities to win, feeling weak themselves.

The working class decomposition we are witnessing did not affect the student movement only in an external way, i.e. through lack of solidarity. It was painfully manifest in the internal processes of the movement itself: only a minority of students was actively present at the occupied schools especially in the period of decline. Few discussions relevant to the law or the demos were held at schools, few leaflets were distributed at demos and even fewer efforts at coordinating actions and communication among occupied schools were made. To a certain degree individualism, the core of the law that the students were fighting against, ended up being their most insidious and dangerous enemy leading to isolation and finally to a bitter defeat.

It is hard to end this text with an optimistic conclusion, especially given the latest information from schools about students running amok in a maze of exams and with more and more frequent signs of competition (usually about marks) appearing among them. It will be the subject matter of a future text to evaluate the traces this student revolt left both on the field of school and society in general.

Chronology

In August 1997 the educational law 2525 passed introducing major reforms on all levels of education. As far as secondary education is concerned all existing types of upper high schools get abolished and unified in one: the so-called "Unified Upper High School". Until now the role of state upper high school has consisted in providing a 3-year attendance state certificate necessary for entrance to the university. It was just a preparatory stage, and indeed a slack one, since marks did not make any difference in university entrance: there were separate national exams in 4 subjects at the end of the 3rd grade. The new law "upgrades" the status of the state school introducing constant assessment of students through manifold exams, everyday tests (some of which pertaining to students' behaviour and personality) and a national certificate of studies with marks of all subjects of the 2 last grades determining the entrance to the university. National exams in 14 subjects in the end of the 2nd and 3rd grades correspondingly would in turn determine marks. Apart from the exams, new books were given based on a predominantly formalistic model, typically american in origin (i.e. multiple-choice questions etc) making meaning hard to detect or vanish altogether.

However, it would take almost a year for the students to realize the new reforms advertised as "Open Horizons" and "Free Access to Universities", because it was this school year (1998-99) that the law was fully applied in the secondary school.

The first school occupation began in mid/late October in Thessaloniki and around mid-November 300 upper high schools had been occupied out of a total of 1200 (junior high schools are about 1800). In the beginning there were more occupations spread around the country, in provincial cities and towns than in Athens -a situation that later changed.

The minister of education, who has built an image of himself as an intransigent politician, held the Teachers' Union responsible for the student movement and just to maintain a

spectacle of negotiation invited them to discuss so irrelevant matters that even the Socialist Party's faction of the union disapproved him. The movement was gradually turning into a rebellion: until mid-December 1/3 of the junior and upper high schools (about a 1000) were closed. Large demos were organised in Athens and many other places all over the country, almost one every week, with liveliness competing with increasing violence. The main targets were prefectures or government buildings in general, reporters, cops and police stations (especially in places where clashes with the police and arrests had preceded). Almost everyday main streets in Athens or elsewhere were blocked, a practice initiated by the "Communist" Party-controlled Coordinating Committee of occupied schools in Athens and intended to be symbolic and of short duration, however students turned road blocks into angry outbursts and fields of play.

As a counterbalance to the CP student committee, which, although it did not represent anyone but the party members, was trying nevertheless to establish itself as an institutional organ and a negotiating partner through press conferences, a Students' Initiative was formed by students of around 20 occupied schools in Athens. It was an honest effort of young people to organize themselves although leftists of various organisations rushed into guiding them, with little success though.

Just before Christmas holidays the minister announced some alterations to the law which proved to be next to nothing even in comparison to conservative proposals made by government supporters. The government placed its hopes on students' fatigue and the actions taken by party members disguised as "indignant parents" to put an end to the rebellion. During Christmas most schools were deserted and several returned to normality in early January. However, a lot remained occupied. It was in those that thug-like parents attempted raids to prevent students from holding assemblies and voting for occupation. Public prosecutors started legal proceedings here and there responding to anonymous charges or demands made by local secondary school administrators.

The government threatened the students with the school year's loss and asked headmasters to call prosecutors on the spot. Headmasters did not obey except for few (usually members of the Socialist Party) who terrorized both students and sympathetic teachers. The Teachers' Union denounced state repression and called for a 2-day strike. The first week after holidays the tension at schools was heavy. Wherever parents had prevented assemblies students responded with abstention from classes. Scenes of violence and ridicule became an everyday phenomenon: a student chased by a teacher and his headmaster and threatened to be handed over to the cops and the prosecutor jumped down from the first floor of his occupied school and got injured. Parents occupied a school themselves at night taking advantage of the small number of guarding students and hired private security to guard it. A headmaster and some parents slept at school having wolf-hounds with them to prevent it from getting occupied by students. A mayor and some parents got a group of council employees to occupy the school of their area but the students sealed the doors by means of oxy-welding while their teachers struck for 1 day in protest.

At road blocks things were not calmer: "indignant drivers", often cadres of the Socialist Party, would hit students and run away or menace them with bats, only to get buried under tons of eggs, yogurt or stones.

In mid-January the number of the school occupations had been stabilized at around 700, with half of them in Athens. In demos, a new police method was launched: at the end of the demos, while people would disperse in small groups the riot police would arrest mainly young students judging only by appearance. Some of those students faced felony charges.

A new thing in the demos was the dynamic presence of Albanian students. Those of them arrested got badly beaten by the racist cops or got a free haircut, as was the case with a young Albanian student. A wide publicity was given to the incident with a hypocritical outcry against the cop (who was suspended) both by the government and the media in a spectacular effort to pass over in silence the numerous arrests and heavy charges -only in Athens the number of people arrested were over 50. The most serious case was that of an Albanian student charged with a couple of felonies (one of them being arson for throwing a molotov cocktail against a riot cop). He was savagely beaten up by cops and taken into police custody for some time. It was only after his fellow students had demonstrated against his detention (and some "sensitive" politicians had mediated) that he was released, awaiting trial. The fellow students' night demo with firebrands, although not as large as it could have been since politicians were as many as the students, was one of the most important events not only of the student rebellion, but also of this decade for the solidarity shown in a country characterized by racist attitudes towards Albanians.

In the end of January the minister invited to an "exchange of views" 50 selected students, heads of the students' councils -a formal student organ usually surpassed and fallen into discredit during radical movements- in a spectacular move both to appear conciliatory and legitimize the insignificant changes he had made to the law as regards exams. Shortly after, the CP-controlled committee retreated from the initial demand for the abolition of the law and accepted the abolition or even the suspension for this year of the 2nd grade exams. They insisted on a meeting with the minister, who refused, and they therefore proved how much more important for the CP was the recognition of its committee as an official negotiating partner than the abolition of the law.

Despite the disagreements among the different party factions within it, the Teachers' Union focused clearly on the question of the exams of the 2nd grade and not on the law as a whole. At the weekend of January 30th-31st, the Teachers' Union was about to hold a meeting to work out some definite proposals to the minister and thus help him save the law but for minor details. They were also trying to show the students that they could represent them and indirectly guide them. However, the students' Initiative thought differently: some dozens of them "raided" the unions' offices demanding to participate to the meeting. The meeting was disrupted and the Socialist Party faction denounced the students' intervention. The next day the students were present again just to come face to face with leftist teachers (mainly maoists) who gathered there to protect the meeting from any possible disruption and thus defend the union. Anyway, the meeting never took place

and the union did not come up with any concrete proposals. Practically, this students' minority dynamic action only prolonged the termination of the movement for a couple of weeks. Gradually more and more schools resumed classes in a climate of tension, fatigue and disappointment. By mid- February the last strongholds (the schools that were occupied for almost 3 months) fell. The party was over (?)

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