

DAYS OF JUNE '98: DAYS OF CLASS STRUGGLE IN GREECE

What follows does not wish to present itself as having the character of a full-scale analysis of the enlightened-by-molotov cocktails and marked-by-class hatred days of the examination of ASEP (High Council for Personnel Selection) for the hiring of teachers. Nor can it be enriched with a chronicle of all the events and conflicts in the 20 cities of Greece, in which thousands of people took part, during the same days. Such an attempt requires a calmness that the emotionally charged moments do not yet have, as well as a collective effort which is not yet possible. What follows is a first estimation of the moments we experienced around the 18th high school of Patisia in Athens, which was used as an examination centre. We talk neither about victory nor about defeat. From our proletarian point of view we would like to shed light to those sides of theory and practice that led to this explosion of struggle, thus contributing to its continuation.

What has become obvious to everyone, from the most conservative unappointed teacher to the most self-important "leader," to the surprise of the former and the fear of the latter, is that whatever happened from the 11th of June onwards can only be described as class war. The escalation of this struggle was rapid; thus, it could only take the characteristics of a military confrontation.

The struggle against the educational law 2525 had begun before it passed in parliament in August with the first actions of the unappointed teachers (the handing out of leaflets at schools at the beginning of the school year) and, already since fall, it had no support from OLME/DOE (the teachers' unions). Since the only provisions of the law which were implemented were the ones that abolished the Education List and introduced the first PSE (Programmes of Optional Studies) in the universities, the struggle against the law did not involve others apart from the unappointed, the substitute teachers, and the university students. The new educational system, a new Panopticon, where all shall be subject to constant evaluation and surveillance is still in its infancy. So, the magnitude of the attempted reform could not be objectively understood by everyone - and more specifically, the high school students who were absent from these struggles. The mobilization of all the police forces of Greece for the realisation of only one part of this reform proves the huge importance that the government attaches to it.

The active participation of the primary school teachers through their general assemblies in early May reinforced the united front of the unappointed teachers and the university students in the last minute. Two

weeks before the confrontation, the organisational form of the teachers' struggle was "discovered." We are talking about the "open committees of struggle" which were created by a) left-wing trade-unionists who aimed at the political capitalisation of the struggle for the benefit of their trade-unionist factions and b) a minority of rank-and-file union members. The aim of the first was to create a Bolshevik-type "central coordinating committee," that is to say a coordinating committee of the left-wing factions of the trade unions, a shadow OLME/DOE which would attempt to direct the struggle, covered up by the spectacle of the direct democratic decisions. The aim of the second was to "take control of the struggle" by realising the decisions of their general assemblies without really understanding that this would only come true through a conflict with the trade-union leadership and its left-wing factions.

The "central coordinating committee" which had been formed before the open general assembly at the Polytechnic School on the 5th of June, pretended in front of 1000 people, who were anxious about finding a method to organise their fight, that it was formed there. It was the final act of a ridiculous process of manipulation. And that is how the short history of the committees of struggle ended up, after the left-wing trade-unionists had managed to demobilise them - with the important exception of some committees of struggle which organised the meeting of teachers and students at the Ionidios school of Piraeus and came out with one of the few resolutions with a clear position in favour of the occupation of the centres in which the examination was to take place.

And this is how the short history of the committees of struggle ended up, because the rank-and-file workers which constituted them could not escape the rationale of delegating powers to the "professional activists."

The open meeting was not attended only by primary school teachers but also by unappointed and secondary school teachers, university students, unemployed, and some workers. The situation was explosive. Nobody was satisfied with what was "decided" at the Polytechnic School (only 80 to 100 people stuck their hands in the air to vote for the proposals). Some left-wing trade-unionists talked about occupations on Thursday morning (June 11th), without explaining how exactly they were going to be practically realised. They called for a demonstration organised by OLME/DOE on Wednesday evening aiming merely at a display of power, but without being able to convince anyone of its use value.

All this led a small group of committees and persons to act autonomously from the "coordinating committee" attempting to occupy a centre on Wednesday, at a time which would surprise the police forces. The plan failed however, and responsibility lies on the majority of the members of a student initiative that decided at the last minute that "the terms of a massive movement" were not satisfied. On Wednesday night, there was the

Clashes in central Athens. Authorities tell students (with an iron fist) to return to the classroom to study history. Apparently, the students would rather make history. Stones and petrol bombs follow shortly.



demonstration-stroll to the parliament, away from the examination centres. After the demonstration, a group of substitute teachers decided to move towards the occupation of the centre situated in a north, wealthy suburb called Pefki. After a few hours, the number of people willing to undertake this occupation was a bit larger. The occupation took place at two o'clock in the night. 80 people were at Pefki, the "central coordinating committee" - which had been dragged behind the events - among them, the TV channels from quite early, and one riot police van. The occupation was evacuated at 6:30 in the morning and there were two arrests.

On Thursday morning outside the 18th high school of Patisia, the two opposing camps lined up for the battle: on the one hand there was the riot police (MAT) who had already occupied the school and the surrounding place and, on the other, the students, the unappointed and the permanent teachers, and various other workers. The attack on the MAT was so violent and intense that they were taken by surprise. The roughly-made barricades and the pointed stones, the iron rods, and the siphons(!) which were thrown at them did not only scare the riot police in the first place, but also the internal forces of suppression of the movement that, it's true, wanted a conflict - something unavoidable due to the intentions of the people - but one confined to the well-known framework of a "controlled" one a la KKE ("Communist" Party of Greece). The rough equipment of those who fought was not sufficient to halt the charge of the MAT who, using lots of chemicals, managed to make the first 3 arrests. The people were able to regroup but their intentions varied. Some wanted the continuation of the conflict; others wanted to calm down the situation. The result was a

demonstration of 2,500 people heading for the police station of the area; however, the arrested people had been taken to the central police headquarters. A while later the demonstrators returned to Patision Street and had an open general assembly in which the general mood was to remain there and try to block the school. And of course we heard the usual accusations against the “outside elements who entered the ranks of the teachers,” which met the booing of the gathered people. We arranged a meeting for 5 o’clock in the afternoon at the square of Agios Elefterios, and while the people were scattered around, the MAT charged again and arrested 3 more protesters while collecting the incriminating evidence: helmets and red and black flags! The same day, two young protesters who were traveling in a public bus, having probably been identified and marked out by the police earlier, were noticed by a passing police van when they shouted something against them. The cops stopped the vehicle and forced the driver with their guns to open the door so that they could arrest the two young men.

On Friday the 12th, the first day of the national examination, the meeting time was set quite early in the morning, at about 6 o’clock. The blockade of the school worked quite well until 9 o’clock, and only about 30 candidates managed to get to the school. The first confrontations were followed by a well organised blockade, where hundreds of people decisively stopped any supervisor or candidate from entering. The protesters hooted and jeered at the candidates and, in some cases, there was actual physical fighting. It needs to be pointed out that many of us were not aggressive during the submission of application forms by the candidates at the prefectures, because we considered that, since we would meet the vast majority of the unappointed teachers there and not in the half-empty halls of the general assemblies, we had a good opportunity to make approaches to them and not fight with them. The great majority of the candidates is unemployed or temporary workers and can easily become victims to the capitalist ideology of meritocracy. However, on Friday, they knew about the riots, the beatings by the police and the arrests of the previous day all over Greece but none the less loads of them started coming, some impudently, and most of them slyly demanding their entrance. That was when we lost our patience. Their action revealed the enormity of the social cretinism and the petty bourgeois mentality facing us. Many of them were escorted by their parents and pretended either to be indifferent or even waited for the MAT to break up the blockade with batons and tear gas so that they could go through peacefully. Even pregnant candidates went through hell to take part in the examination “for the benefit of their children.” This “vanguard of meritocracy” - as the assistant Minister of Education called them - the vanguard of selfishness, deserved to be held up to public ridicule a la EAS, and the fact that something like that did not happen is probably because

either the protesters were too tactful or hesitant or simply not imaginative enough. We did however hear teachers making an appointment with those “vanguardists” for September.

After the barricades had been erected on Friday we had certain internal conflicts which were concentrated around the issue of our more or less aggressive attitude towards the MAT. Some unappointed teachers who were conservative and green at clashes with the cops, thought that they were there “just to surround the centre peacefully” and thus they interpreted any stone throwing, barricade or burning of a police car as a sign of “thuggery” or “meaningless provocation.” But if inexperience can be forgiven, there is absolutely no excuse for the left-wing “leaders” who drew out from the depths of history of the KKE the accusation of “provocateurs,” an accusation which in many phases of the class war has been used as a means of manipulation and repression of riots.

The big difference however, in comparison to other situations was that in those particular days, in those particular places, all weapons used had one use value: the continuation of the blockade of the centres through our self-protection. The MAT had been ordered to disperse us by any means and at any cost, thus whatever was used by our side was not only useful but also necessary. Moreover, should we accept that one of the reasons why some people reacted against the riot was a pacifist attitude, the contradictory and dangerous nature of this attitude was soon revealed: you do not keep an appointment in a blockade where the obvious aim is to clash with the police with empty hands and pacifist intentions since you know that the enemy will destroy you; you might as well set yourself on fire as an act of protest!

The same day there were two more arrests by the secret police and the MAT, and although the ministry gave a new extension for the commencement of the exam at 10 o'clock and, according to all signs, the MAT would attempt to disperse us, the “leaders,” using their loud speakers stirred waves of enthusiasm and “victory” urging the people to retreat and demonstrate in the streets towards the law courts, where the 6 arrested were going to go on a trial. The MAT did strike and most people gathered in Patision St., where one part of the demonstration continued the riot, and the other part was wondering why it was leaving. In the end, the two blocks banded together to march towards the law courts.

After all this, the “central coordinating committee” decided to defuse the situation by calling for a blockade of the exam centre in Pefki on Saturday morning. Regardless of the unfavourable circumstances, the people did actually try to blockade the school. But a large number of candidates managed to get inside. The state prosecutor's appearance for the first time outside a school was enough reason for the trade-unionists to attempt to break up the gathered people from 9:30 in the morning. Around 11 o'clock, the last protesters left the school.

On Sunday the rage against the trade-unionists' attempt to defuse the struggle was unstoppable. From very early in the morning, people started gathering near the high school of Patisia again. Around 6 o'clock, the MAT charged with tear gas near the train station of Ag. Eleftherios and arrested a construction worker who was subsequently badly beaten up. The mass of people gathered again and separated themselves into three blocks, each in a different barricade: one in Agia Barbara, one in Patisation St., and one in Ag. Eleftherios, underneath the train station. In the last one, where we were, not one TV cameraman was able to approach and thus we did not have the "joy" of having media coverage of what went on. This block was constituted by various left-wing people, unappointed teachers, metropolitan youth and anarchists. There were two barricades and the throwing of stones and molotov cocktails held the riot police back for more than 3 hours. Two cops were set ablaze, something that the media concealed. What needs to be stressed is the perfect cooperation of all of us who found ourselves fighting in the same barricades. Even though the fighters, who risked a lot by being in the front line and charging at the police, and the crowd of people who stayed in the back did not exchange positions apart from only a few times, the harmony between the people was amazing. The flying pickets did not break up regardless of the tear gas; they covered the ones in the front line with their size and determination, and they only opened when those of the front line temporarily retreated. Equally moving was the solidarity of the people who lived in that area. They provided us with food, lemons for the tear gas, water, medicines, and moral support, and made us feel that we were not alone (similar workers' solidarity was expressed throughout the days by the railway workers who provided us with stones and iron bars from the railway). Fatigue started winning us over and as the crucial time of 9 o'clock came, everyone was able to feel the danger approaching. Those who were at the top of the bridge throwing stones had a better survey of the battlefield and warned us of the charge of the police from the right side. The attack was coordinated and came from two different places at the same time, from the front and from the side and the front lines did not manage to hold them back. The panic-stricken crowd, suffocated by the tear gas, started retreating. At that point a third unit of MAT came from the back and shut us off, while throwing more tear gas among us. Those who did not have time to leave from the top of the bridge, jumped over the high and rusty railway wire netting and through clouds of smoke towards the nearest avenue. Many entered into some blocks of flats and were protected by the dwellers, who refused to open the door when the MAT rang the bell. About 30 people were sheltered by an elderly person who kept them in his house until the danger was over, and 8 unlucky people were arrested in a yard. The MAT chased us all the way to the avenue, where some of us gathered up again and returned to the barricades

with the hope of retrieving any wounded. Over there, the riot police, which had taken over the bridge by then and proudly looked down on us, received the swears of some middle-aged teachers - something that they surely did not expect from “respectable” workers. Later, in Patision St., since the barricades had been destroyed, there was a march towards the law courts.

On Monday, only a few people gathered at Ag. Elefterios and around the school. The MAT came down with very angry and intimidating intentions talking about arrests, about people who had been videotaped the previous days, while pointing out at some. Later on, when the 9 arrested were brought in the law courts, the MAT were so enraged that they arrested a young student on the spot.

The same night, at a teacher mass meeting, Tsoulias, the president of OLME (the secondary school teachers trade union) was heavily attacked with yogurts, chairs, and dustbins thrown at him by unappointed teachers and enraged anti-bureaucrats; he only managed to avoid being lynched due to the involvement of some left-wing militants. It is obvious that no organisation and no groupescule could control the rage and revenge of those who actively participated in the street fighting around the examination centres and those who see state power and suppression, bureaucracy, and the grave-diggers of class struggles in the person of the state official Tsoulias. The same day, the left-wing factions of the teachers’ trade union, actually a bunch of people from leftist organisations, denounced the attack against Tsoulias by appealing to “principles” - a denunciation which can only be understood if seen as a statement of loyalty and as an attempt to politicise fear towards the trade unions bureaucracy. Let’s explain ourselves. We did not personally take part in the attempted lynch, and we are not in favour of attempts on anybody’s life when they are unable to defend themselves. Other more imaginative ways of holding somebody up to public ridicule would have been more effective. (We could learn a lot from our Albanian comrades who during their revolt last year stripped Tritan Sehou, the vice-president of the Democratic Party naked and took him for a ride with a leek up in his ass.) Anyway what was important is that the very act of the attack, regardless of how exactly it happened, was a continuation of the class struggle which took place all over Greece around the exam centres.

No denunciation can hold back either the rage of the people or state repression, which came down violently and immediately as a response. On Tuesday afternoon, outside the law courts 2 students and an unappointed teacher were brutally beaten up by 9 thugs. While one of them is still fighting for his life in hospital and the other two are injured, who can doubt that, regardless of whether the attackers were fascists or policemen in civilians’ clothes, these animals were on an official assignment of revenge for the intensity of the class war that was waged in the last days, as well as

for the attack against Tsoulias? Any retreat at this point will not only bury the movement, but will also prove to be very dangerous since it will give the state a free hand to counter-attack both on a political and an everyday level.

We will attempt to come up with some conclusions, even if our judgment may be coloured by the personal experiences of those days. Undoubtedly, the class confrontation in the form of street fighting was the result of the overcoming of not only the union bureaucracies, but also the left-wing “leadership.” The spontaneous clashes with the police led up to a metropolitan guerilla warfare, a “civil” war climate which can only be compared with the schools occupation movement in ‘90-’91. Politically, this movement went beyond the mere refusal of the examination and some provisions of the 2525 law. It was the first big fight against lifelong “productive” education, constant evaluation of efficiency, and the misery of unemployment and temp work in Greece. The battlefield, in material terms, was offered as a field of expression of the totality of class hatred and anger. The streets of the riots were the meeting places of temporary and permanent teachers, of intellectual and manual workers, of students and their old teachers, and of “elements outside education” and rank-and-file union members. The class was reunited with such violence that rendered any trade unionist appeal to legality or to sectional interests inoperative. Although it began as an educational mobilisation, soon, either with direct calls to the working people or to the “people” in general, or through the spontaneous participation of the young metropolitan proletariat, the struggle and the composition of its subjects acquired more general class

Students of Athens Polytechnic School give Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis a warm greeting of airborne eggs and tomatoes.



characteristics. The explosion of hatred gave the conflict the clarity of a military confrontation against the MAT, who represented the power of the state. Young temps came into contact with substitute, unappointed, and permanent teachers, whom these young people called until recently “petty bourgeois” or “the mind police.” The teachers had a chance to meet the “200 troublemakers,” admired their courage, familiarized themselves with masked people, and masked up themselves as well. It goes without saying that all this did not take place in an ideal way but through conflicts and confrontations. Many of the teachers, whether left-wing or not, who reacted violently against stone throwing and “scoundrelish” actions which “discredit the teachers’ struggle” on Friday, helped to make molotov cocktails and covered those who threw them on Sunday. Many were those who learned the lessons of the barricades, and many were those who learned from each other. The wild youth was taught that the “submission” of the workers during the “quiet” periods can very easily turn into proletarian rage. In a collective, proletarian struggle, identities and roles can fade away, and the unappointed teacher cannot easily be distinguished from the “chaotic youngster.” During those days, it was possible, even temporarily, to show not only the suicidal vanity of ritualised Polytechnic school riots but also the conservatism and the dead end of the boring demonstrations of the trade unions. The subjects of those riots, both political and social, managed to break their isolation and their pre-constructed, narrow roles and unite the different parts of the class, maybe temporarily, but definitely unforgettably.

This community of struggle and this collective resistance against the MAT, i.e. the defenders of the dominant order, and against the inhuman survival under capitalism went far beyond the issue of the examination and the opposition to the law 2525 as it was prepared by a “conscious” left minority. Hence, cooperation on a military level was finally able to be satisfactory since the “party offices” and the secret meetings proved to be useless. The left-wing organisations always follow the events - by demonstrating their irrationality; no political programme and no political plan or directive could have limited and controlled the class struggle, and no class struggle of such intensity and range could have followed the decisions of the “central committee” of any groupescule.

What remains to be communicated are the class logos. All those who joined forces behind the barricades for apparently different reasons must publicize the underlying reason for their struggle - to show the truth that their actions seek.

**WELL-KNOWN PROLETARIANS
ATHENS - 18 JUNE, 1998**