

# **The Resistance Movement Against the Privatization of Higher Education in Greece**

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## **Abstract**

*In the wake of the triumphant university student movement that took place 17 years ago, in defense of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution – a provision which stipulates that higher education should be accessible at no cost and should be provided exclusively by public institutions – the right-wing conservative government of New Democracy has enacted a new law for the establishment of private universities by circumventing constitutional processes.*

*The objective of this policy is to implement the neoliberal strategy of transferring public sectors to private capital, thereby rendering them profitable entities.*

*This paper describes how the neoliberal policy has been trying to be implemented in Greek higher education during the last thirty years and that this policy is an implementation of precisely this neoliberal principle. This paper also expounds on the struggles against neoliberal policies in Greece and the pivotal role of the movement in defense of the public university, emphasizing its militant nature and providing an account and assessment of the strategies being employed in order to prepare for a resurgence.*

**Keywords:** *Privatisation, Resistance, Struggle, Greece, Universities, Neoliberalism*

### **Introduction: Once more on the key features of neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that emphasizes free trade, deregulation, globalization, and a reduction in government spending. It is based on the belief that the free market is the most efficient way to organize economic activity, and that government intervention should be minimized.

Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the perceived failure of Keynesian economics to address the stagflation of the time. It was popularized by politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and its policies have been implemented in many countries around the world. In the late 80's, even traditional Social Democracy adopted gradually the neoliberal dogmas.

The first implementation of neoliberalism was in Chile with the government of the dictator Pinochet. Indeed, the implementation of neoliberalism has as a prerequisite the defeat of the trade union opposition.

Neoliberal policy is based on certain key features. And these features have been followed strictly in every country that is under a neoliberal government. Below, I give a short exposition:

*Free trade:* Neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of free trade and open markets. It supports the removal of tariffs and other trade barriers, and it encourages the free movement of goods and services across borders.

*Deregulation:* Neoliberalism also emphasizes the importance of deregulation. It supports reducing or eliminating government regulations on businesses, in order to allow them to operate more efficiently to make profit.

*Privatization:* Neoliberalism also supports the privatization of state-owned enterprises. This means selling off government-owned businesses to private investors.

*Austerity:* Neoliberalism also supports fiscal austerity, which means reducing government spending. This is often done by cutting social programs and public services.

Neoliberalism has been credited with assisting to boost capitalist economic growth. However, it has also been criticized for leading to increased inequality, environmental damage, and a decline in the quality of life for the people.

As mentioned before, health and education are the privileged terrains for the implementation of neoliberal policy.

Education is one of the sectors in which the global crisis of capitalism of the last thirty years has been increasingly exposed. The capitalist crisis has compelled capital to adopt an aggressive strategy, characterized by the implementation and promotion of neoliberal and neoconservative policies on an international scale (Hill, 2022).

These policies have been presented as the 'only solution' and are often espoused under the slogan 'there is no alternative' (TINA). This has fundamentally reshaped the socio-political and ideological function of education. Consequently, the availability of free public education is diminishing, and its

status as a social and human right is being contested. Education, particularly in the last three decades, has undergone a marked shift towards a commercialized model, accompanied by a decline in its democratic characteristics (Hill, 2009; 2024).

Since the 1980s, higher education, as an institution of social welfare, has undergone a period of weakening as the welfare state is transformed into a corporate state. Consequently, the public university has been transformed into a centre for training a flexible workforce suitable for capitalist enterprise. At the same time, private capital, through sponsorships and research programs, exerts a substantial influence on the functioning of university education and research.

Undoubtedly, there has been a marked shift towards a more market-driven approach, with a concomitant de-legitimization of content and a diminution of emphasis on critical knowledge and analysis (Šumonja, 2021).

This paper examines the attempts of the Greek bourgeoisie to impose neoliberal policies on the Greek people. The culmination of these attempts has been the austerity measures imposed upon the Greek people by the troika and the memoranda. Greece is the country most severely hit by neoliberalism. And during the culmination of this neoliberal Armageddon in 2012, the Greek bourgeoisie passed a law in parliament for the privatization of higher education and restrictions on academic freedom. The privatization of the public university is symbolically the “mother of all battles” for the bourgeoisie and the Left alike.

### **How the neoliberal policy on education is implemented in Greece**

In Greece, the adoption of privatization policies was initiated in the 1990's by the conservative government of New Democracy, establishing it as a fundamental tenet of its political agenda (Souliotis, 2021).

The New Democracy's centralized state apparatus has been attacking all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary) with particular ferocity and determination over the past period in order to implement its neoliberal policy, following the dictates of the OECD, the EU, and the Confederation of Greek Industrialists (SEV). Furthermore, it found strong footing in both the law on school evaluation passed during the PASOK era and the laws passed by the SYRIZA government on teacher qualifications.

With the Law 4823/2021, the main goal of New Democracy is the privatization and commercialization of education through the autonomy of school units - their operation as autonomous enterprises - their evaluation and categorization, the evaluation of school teachers with the aim of abolishing tenure and justifying dismissals, as well as creating fearful and obedient workers to faithfully follow bourgeois policies, and finally the evaluation of students through a frenzy of exams (starting from the 6th grade of elementary school, PISA, National Apolytirion).

Such a school will operate with a manager-director who will be able to make decisions alone, essentially abolishing the School Teachers' Council, which as an organ allowed for a more democratic operation of the school. In addition, more and more schoolteachers work as substitutes, i.e., with various types of flexible employment relationships and with reduced labor rights compared to their tenured colleagues, already reaching 1/3 of the total staff.

The appointments made in recent years, which the government boasts about, are a drop in the ocean, as while a large part of the staff was retiring, appointments for 12 years (during the period of economic crisis) were almost non-existent.

It is characteristic that even the nearly 30,000 substitutes hired each year are not enough to meet the needs for teachers in the schools. The next step will be the direct hiring of teachers by the manager-director, as well as the free choice of school by the parents, the selection of students by each school in order to have a good evaluation and therefore funding, either from the state budget or from parents or from private sponsors, (Koinzer et al, 2017; Musset, 2012; Simon, 2013).

The school curricula are fragmented and, instead of knowledge, priority is given to the skills that young workers need today, along with the so-called "soft skills", i.e., entrepreneurship, volunteering, adaptability, resilience and productivity. In this way, a space of competition is created where relationships of cooperation and collegiality, as well as teacher-student-parent relationships, are broken. Everyone gradually functions as an individual and turns to individualism (see also Hursch, 2017).

Teachers' salaries have been reduced since the pandemic by up to 40% of their annual income, while due to the high cost of living, inflation, and taxation, they have been reduced by about 25% more. Newly appointed and substitute teachers are expected to live on 730 euros a month.

At the same time, the funding of schools has been reduced, and many schools, especially kindergartens, are housed in inadequate, even dilapidated and dangerous buildings, as evidenced by accidents reported in the daily press. According to the latest law, School Committees will be abolished in 2025. Thus, it is expected that the management of funds will be done by the Local Municipal Authorities. In essence, the bourgeois state is shifting the responsibility for the funding and operation of education to teachers, students, and parents.

Similar policies are implemented in the Greek tertiary Education accompanied by the policy of institutionalization of private universities.

The public university is experiencing a gradual economic strangulation with a diminishing provision of public funding, a process that is facilitating its transformation into a business entity. There is an increasing imposition of barriers to access through the implementation of the Lowest Access Grade (Grollios & Liampas 2021), while private "colleges" have been given license to operate asserting "equivalence" with public universities. These "colleges" are, in essence, private businesses that seek to attract "customers" for profit, rather than students. These "colleges" lack research premises and facilities, as research is perceived as "expensive" and has a long-term turnover. The faculty is often underqualified (often without a doctorate) and poorly paid, and most significantly, there is an absence of basic academic freedom for teaching and collective expression.

As previously mentioned, neoliberal policies in higher education have been attempted to be implemented in Greece over the last thirty years. Nevertheless, initial endeavours to implement neoliberal policies have been met with significant resistance, as will be exhibited in the subsequent paragraphs. This resistance has come from various sectors, including the student movement, university faculty members, and the broader labour movement.

A pivotal article, Article 16 of the Constitution, which came into effect following the overthrow of the military junta in 1974, explicitly stipulates that higher education is to be provided exclusively by public institutions:

«Article 16 (Education, art, science): 1. Academic freedom and freedom of teaching shall not exempt from the duty of obedience to the Constitution. 2. Education is a

basic mission of the State and its purpose is the moral, spiritual, professional and physical education of Greeks, the development of national and religious consciousness and the formation of free and responsible citizens. [...] 4. All Greeks have the right to free education, at all levels, in state educational institutions. The State supports students who excel, as well as those who need help or special protection, according to their abilities. 5. Higher education is provided exclusively by institutions which are legal persons under public law with full self-government. These institutions are under the supervision of the State, have the right to receive financial assistance from the State and operate in accordance with the laws governing their institutions. The merger or division of institutions of higher education may be carried out notwithstanding any contrary provision, as provided by law. A special law shall provide for student associations and the participation of students in them. 6. Teachers in higher educational institutions are public officials. The other members of their teaching staff are also public servants, subject to the conditions laid down by law. The status of all such persons shall be determined by the governing bodies of the institutions concerned. [...] The establishment of higher education establishments by private individuals is prohibited” (Government Gazette A/211/24.12.2019).

It is evident that the Greek Constitution prohibits the operation of higher education institutions by private institutions or associations. It has to be noted, that private institutions (termed 'colleges') providing higher education, until recently have been operating in cooperation with foreign universities and were not recognized as equivalent to universities.

Following the 1990s, both the conservative governments of New Democracy and the social democratic governments of the PASOK have repeatedly attempted to revise the Constitution by abolishing Article 16 or to introduce private education in a roundabout way without realizing their plan until the academic year 2023-24.



This development occurred seventeen years after the triumphant university student movement in defense of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution.

In a recent legislative act that has been passed in parliament in spring 2024, the conservative government of New Democracy has effectively established private "universities", circumventing constitutional restrictions claiming that the Constitution does not prohibit the operation of branches of international universities within the framework of the European Law which supersedes national legislation.

Prior to 2004, the higher education system in Greece had not been aligned with the neoliberal model that was in effect throughout the European Union. The inaugural document of this policy is “The White Paper: Growth, Competitiveness and Employment: the challenges and ways forward into the 21st century” (1994), a document issued by the European Commission, establishing a direct correlation between education and employment, as well as economic development within the European Union (Stuckler, 2013).

This document underlined the significance of education as a strategic economic and social investment, asserting that it would position Europe at a competitive advantage in relation to its economic rivals (European Commission 1994).

Subsequently, in 1995, the “White Paper: 'Education and Training - Teaching and Learning Towards the Learning Society”, by the Commission of the European Union (European Commission 1995). This document further delineated the objectives of the European Commission, namely, to increase investment in the development of human resources, to establish links between universities and businesses, and to encourage research to produce new knowledge. This document signifies the inaugural coherent endeavor by the

European Union to situate education and training at the core of its strategy for fostering economic and social cohesion (Jones, 2013).

The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), which followed the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), is particularly relevant to the issue under discussion. It reiterated Articles 126 and 127 of the latter as Articles 149 and 150. Article 150 delineates the objectives of European Union as fostering cooperation between educational institutions and enterprises, enhancing initial vocational training and augmenting the mobility of trainers and trainees (European Union 1997).

The Treaty of Amsterdam introduced the concept of 'lifelong education and training' as a fundamental dimension of public education and employment policy, thereby effectively undermining the employment rights that had hitherto been associated with the university degrees and the 'employability' of graduates.

The Declaration of Bologna, issued on 19 June 1999, established a "single and coherent European Higher Education Area". The primary objectives of this declaration were twofold: firstly, to enhance the mobility and the "employability" of European higher education graduates; and secondly, to ensure the competitiveness of European higher education on a global scale (as per the Directorate for Higher Education). Among the objectives of the Declaration were the reform of higher education into two cycles: a first cycle directly linked to the labour market and a second, higher cycle leading to higher studies (European Ministers of Education 1999). These documents constitute the core of the European Union's neoliberal policy on Education. Their sole purpose was to undermine employment rights and to facilitate the creation of a flexible work force with high qualifications in line with the demands of big capital.

## **The chronicle of resistance**

In Greece, the New Democracy government attempted to implement the first neoliberal measures for higher education in the early 1990's. The ministerial decision known as β2 2655/7.6.1990, which was prepared by the Minister V. Kontogiannopoulos (Eliadis 2014), proposed the abolition of free textbooks and reductions in other benefits for students, including food and housing subsidies. It also proposed in the limitation of students' involvement in the election of university authorities and the operation of private universities with a 'par' interpretation of Article 16 of the Constitution.

Furthermore, it led to the elimination of the yearbook for the appointment of schoolteachers, the imposition of a time limit on the duration of university studies, and other restrictions on the university asylum.

The response of the education movement was robust, resulting in the non-implementation of the proposed law and the resignation of the minister.

However, this was achieved at a significant cost, as evidenced by the murder of a schoolteacher by a member of the New Democracy party in Patras on 8 January 1991.

This event also marks a significant milestone in the history of the Greek student movement, as it was during this period that the anti-capitalist Left Group (EAAK) was formed. EAAK (known as the United Independent Left Movement) would play a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of the student movement in the ensuing decades. In 2022, students in political alignment with ANTARSYA left EAAK and founded the group “Attack in Universities”.

A few years later, in the academic year 1997-98, under the government of PASOK, the Minister G. Arsenis implemented the law 2525/1997, which abolished the employment rights of graduates of university departments

preparing teachers for secondary education and introduced the "Elective Study Programmes" in the universities undergraduate framework, with tuition fees and with an admission system bypassing the national examinations. That was the first attempt to introduce tuition fees for undergraduate studies (Gounari, 2012).

The student movement confronted this law with dynamic resistance, characterized by prolonged and extensive actions, including occupations of educational institutions and prolonged strikes by schoolteachers.

The tuition fee programs were eventually not implemented and were abolished in 2000. The minister was replaced, but the abolition of the de facto employment rights of graduates is still in force today.

In 2006, the New Democracy government made the first attempt to revise Article 16 of the Constitution, by introducing a draft law for the establishment of private universities, with the agreement of PASOK.

This legislative initiative, in addition to the establishment of private universities, encompassed the implementation of particularly stringent measures within the public university.

Despite the negative correlation of forces at the institutional level, these plans too eventually stumbled in the face of massive resistance from students and university teachers. This resistance is indicative of the political readiness of the movements to resist the nonlinearization of education that would follow (Themelis 2018).

From the spring of 2006, the student movement, with the anti-capitalist left as its leading force, proceeded with a permanent occupation of schools and departments, while the university teachers' union declared a permanent strike.

Militant demonstrations were held on a weekly basis, while state repression reached unprecedented levels. From September 2006 to March 2007, an unparalleled mobilization of teachers and students unfolded.

The law was finally passed on 8 March 2007, in a parliament surrounded by 30,000 students and university teachers, who confronted the police for hours.

However, as the US ambassador stated on 13 March, clearly disappointed, "There is no indication that students and academics are prepared to accept the law as a *fait accompli*" (07ATHENS534).

As it turned out, he was right: delegitimized in the consciousness of the academic community, Law 3549 was never implemented. It is worth noting here the police violence against the students, the arrests and the following trials that lasted until 2015 (Kostopoulos 2014).

### **Why we are against the institutionalization of private universities**

The author of this paper has stood publicly in opposition to the institutionalization of private universities (Katsiampoura, 2024). There are numerous reasons to support this position. In Greece, following the abolition of tuition fees in the 1960s, the public university emerged as a significant source of opportunity for working-class children, facilitating social mobility and the enhancement of living conditions.

Concurrently, the university functioned as a crucible for reflection and political agitation, fostering a milieu of resistance that culminated in the overthrow of the junta in 1974 and continues to serve as a hallmark of intellectual discourse, a veritable crucible of social and political radicalism.

It is noteworthy that in recent years, following the crisis, left-wing student groups have consistently garnered over 50% of the student electoral votes, a figure that stands in stark contrast to the Left's representation in national elections, which hovers below 25%.

The establishment of private universities will certainly undermine public funding of public universities since based on the European Law the principle of parity between the public and the private sector should hold.

The introduction of parity would have a detrimental effect on graduates of public universities, who would effectively see their degrees devaluated in the labor market.

We totally oppose the establishment and operation of private universities for a multitude of reasons (Skordoulis, 2024):

- Because education is a right of all citizens and should be provided free of charge for all. Education is not a commodity.
- Because private universities will be private enterprises. Capital will be invested by well-known funds for profit. The term 'non-profit' is just a rhetorical trick and a challenge to our intelligence.
- Because profit and academic freedom are incompatible concepts. Any attempt to develop critical knowledge stops at the door of the capitalist enterprise. In private universities, free thought and the expression of free opinion will be under strangling control.
- Because teaching cannot be controlled. Teaching is a moral enterprise.
- Because private universities will be euphemistically universities. No research, no humanities and social studies. Research in them is not 'profitable' for the

owners, as demonstrated by the private institutions that have been operating so far.

- Because access to private universities will be open only to those who can pay, thus deepening social inequalities.

- Because, while there is (wrongly) a minimum admission basis for public universities, there will be no such criterion for private universities, so that they can accept as many 'customers' as possible.

- Because this will result in a violent and artificial change in the academic map of the country. Regional universities will shrink, and many departments will disappear or merge.

- Because private universities will be vocational training centers at best, since they are not expected to invest in research infrastructure and develop research. There can be no university education without connected to research.

- Because graduates of private companies calling themselves universities will have the same academic and professional rights as graduates of public universities. This means a violent degradation of the degrees of public universities and of their graduates.

### **An account of the mobilisations against the Law 5094/2024**

The previous academic year, 2023-24, the government of New Democracy, which after the national elections of 2023 has an absolute majority in Greek Parliament, introduced the law 5094/2024: “Strengthening the Public University Framework for the operation of non-profit branches of foreign universities and other provisions” for the establishment of private universities, in violation of Article 16 of the Constitution.

Since January 2024, the student unions, through massive General Assemblies, have decided to occupy more than 150 schools nationwide, while the most

massive student marches in recent years have taken place, with tens of thousands of students and university teachers taking to the streets.

The workers unions also participated in the mobilizations, while the pressure forced both PASOK and SYRIZA, which in the past had either supported the establishment of private universities or left the possibility open, to vote against the law.

A comprehensive analysis of the recent student movement, focusing on its drawbacks, successes, challenges and potential are essential for future mobilizations.

During the previous months, the author of this paper had exhausting discussions with the students participating in the group “Attack in the Universities” and shares most of their assessment of the period under analysis.

In this assessment the following key points should be highlighted:

*Successful mobilizations:* The movement was characterized by widespread student activism, including occupations, protests, and clashes with the police and other state authorities.

*The role of General Assemblies:* These have been affirmed once more as the primary decision-making bodies during student mobilizations.

*Coordination Committees:* While these committees played a role in revitalizing occupations, should be criticized for becoming overly bureaucratic in some cases, especially under the influence of certain political factions.

*Unity and division:* The student movement sought to unite students with workers and other social groups but faced challenges due to internal divisions



and external pressures, particularly from the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and its affiliated organizations.

*The significance of university occupations:* The occupation of the university administration buildings should be seen as a strategic move to broaden the movement's reach and connect with other social groups. However, in many cases most of the students did not embrace these initiatives due to improper planning.

*Government response and future challenges:* The government was forced to make concessions due to the student protests, but the movement faces ongoing challenges and must remain vigilant.

*The need for a strong, independent anticapitalist left:* The importance of an independent anti-capitalist left within the student movement, capable of providing a clear political direction and mobilizing students for broader social change has been proven indispensable once more.

### **What is to be done?**

Following the enactment of the law by the ruling New Democracy party, this cycle of confrontation has reached its conclusion. However, the struggle that has commenced is likely to persist for a considerable duration of time. Central to our strategy is the formation of a united education front comprising not only of university students and teachers, but we should unite with the fighting primary and secondary teachers as well.

The consciousness of school educators has not been largely swayed by government propaganda, and teachers continue to look to the left to express resistance. However, the education movement is influenced by various factors.

From the general disillusionment and lack of political prospects to pressures from directors and councilors, from the subpar and even treacherous stance towards the interests of educators taken by most factions leading federations and unions, to the influx of younger teachers with no experience in struggles or participation in any collectivity, or even with a hostile attitude towards unions at times.

On the other hand, the lack of willingness for self-organization of educational struggles, even by the Anticapitalist Left, does not help to concentrate, strengthen, and activate the pioneering forces in education. The participation of revolutionary Marxists should help with all their might in changing this scenario for a hopeful and victorious outcome of the struggles that lie ahead.

In this period, the movement has created fissures in the implementation of the bourgeois policy on education and has already created the conditions for the overturning of this law as well.

It is significant that the prevailing discourse in favor of private universities has been contested, not questioning merely the constitutional validity of the law.

Moreover, it has initiated a discourse concerning the European Union's own education policy, which is at odds with the principles of neoliberal education policy and the market university.

In this context, the significance of the anti-capitalist left and its formations, in coordinating the struggle with the other sectors of education and the labor movement, becomes apparent.

In Greece, characterized by escalating social inequality, increasing poverty and exploitation, the idea of the public university is a perpetual battleground.

The university's role in this struggle is pivotal, as it serves as a bastion against the neoliberal and market-driven agendas, acting as a crucible for collective emancipation.

The contemporary challenge confronting progressive and radical educators, and the education movement more broadly, is to demonstrate the existence of an alternative educational paradigm, and indeed one that is applicable to the broader socio-economic landscape, to the neoliberal model.

In the context of the prevailing global and uncontrolled market domination, this necessitates the development of Marxist approaches in close alignment with social resistance movements.

This endeavor can be distilled into a single, overarching demand: Education to change the world - education for all.

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