

EUROPEAN POLICIES AND THE REPERCUSSIONS OF MEMORANDA ON EDUCATION

By Themis Kotsifakis*

The last four years an agonizing question tortures people of work and creation: could an end be put to this barbarian, merciless policy of the most callous austerity, of the social expenses continuous curtailments, of the social goods deprivation and of rights limitation, practiced with the excuse of the economic crisis?

Could there be a pressure valve from this barbarian attack released by the domestic authority, with the benedictions of European Union and with the “noble” cooperation of IMF and other international organizations, like OECD and the World Bank?

Could there be a net of protection for citizens, mainly for the financially depressed, from this storm of anti-popular measures that destroy any creative effort before it anticipates blooming and flourishing?

Especially the citizens of South European countries, vitally affected by this policy, realize day by day that their struggle has as a result not some improvement of their daily life, but their survival itself. Work rights are abolished, their income is shrinking, health and education, social welfare and social insurance are degraded decisively and the way to privatization is open. In some countries both work conditions and safeguard of basic social goods are close to the limits of impoverishment. The citizens of Eastern Europe countries face the same problem, just like some social groups in the remaining countries, whether they are under the mortal pressure of a memorandum or not.

For these reasons, nowadays working people are eagerly looking for a way out and this is an intensive need. This is the current need to be met by the worker’s struggle in all fields. This is the need SYRIZA is going to respond to.

“Shock and Awe” policy in Greece

In our country, where memoranda application constitutes a laboratory of extreme neoliberal policy, already the social repercussions of these policies are dramatic for all the workers, but particularly for the most sensitive group, the young people. Thus: youth unemployment (under 25) has dramatically increased reaching up to 60%, whereas in the EU it reaches up to 23,5%, the percentage of young people with no access either to work or to education and training (NEET, Non Employment, Education and Training) went up to 21% in 2012 from 12% in 2008, the benchmarks of poverty and social exclusion of young people under 18 has increased from 26% in 2005 to 35,4% in 2012. Malnutrition cases are present in schools.

At the same time, in public education we have 35% reduction of expenses from 2009, closure or merging of more than 2.000 schools, abolishment of support educational structures and increase of number of students per class.

Regarding teachers, there has been a reduction of 30% of their total number. Particularly, secondary education has suffered. 2.500 VET teachers are being gradually fired. The government has already started, after at least 100 years, firing permanent teachers. Teachers’

salary reductions reached up to 45%. Work conditions have deteriorated (increase of teaching hours, obligatory transfer from one school to another, climate of fear and authoritarianism in schools). Teachers and schools evaluation is connected with students' achievements resulting henceforth from national examinations centrally organised. In this way a rating and ranking tool is in use aiming to the closure of schools and the creation of "reservoirs" for the firing of teachers.

The new education law (4186/2013) leads to the intensifying of examinations and to the early school leaving of students and their promotion to premature, narrow professional training and minors' apprenticeship.

European educational policy

European Union (EU) educational policy is caged more and more in the ideology of neoliberalism, a fact that can be seen both in the produced texts and in the promoted action. At the same time, it develops the activity of other international organizations moving on the same track, like the OECD and the World Bank. Despite the fact that each state's education is considered as a national issue and EU contribution as complementary, in the end EU has developed mechanisms through which it promotes an educational policy dominated by doctrines and practices of the neoliberal capitalism. This policy is imposed to all members-states of EU, the governments of which are anyway willing to follow it.

Mainly in two texts - directives that the European Committee has recently published, "21st Century School" and "Rethinking Education Strategy", a serious shift is attempted from inclusive knowledge to skills learning, as well as a serious and dangerous change regarding values transmitted through the educational system to young people. It is characteristic that, while there is no mention of humanitarian values and pedagogics, there is emphasis on the "values" of competition and entrepreneurship. These are the materials of the "school of the market".

"The efforts", we read in the text of Rethinking Education Strategy, "should be focused on the growth of traverse skills and particularly on enterprising skills". Particular significance is given to the development of enterprising skills that "do not contribute only in the creation of new enterprises, but also in the employability of young people". It directs member states "to promote the enterprising skills" as early as in the primary school!

The intervention therefore in education ideology and values is more serious and sneakier, because it is no easily perceptible; it is not always recognizable as the curtailments of the expenses, but also because EU uses often a vague picture on the quality of education, the eradication of discriminations etc.

Our principles regarding Another School can be summarized as follows:

- Safeguarding the free and public character of education.
- 12 year compulsory education with cohesive characteristics and 2 year preprimary education.
- Focus on the harmonious and multilateral development of young people's personality.

- Reorientation of educational policies with emphasis on humanitarian values.
- Strengthening of democracy and participation in school.
- Fighting of discriminations and exclusions and respect of children's rights. Development of Educational Priority Zones for the support of students with social criteria.
- Public education – research constitutes a basic tool of growth, with respect to individuals and the environment.
- Increase of expenses for Education, even in the period of crisis. The investment in education is one of the means that could lead to the exit from the crisis. It constitutes an investment for a better future.
- No expenses for families for outdoors school educational activities.
- Improvement of work conditions and wage for teachers, scientific and social support. Students' learning depends on teachers' work conditions.

We should unite our forces against neoliberal, anti-popular and anti-educational policies and make alliances with all workers and social movements both in national and in European level.

The multiform fights of teachers, of the educational community but also of all the workers in Greece, in Portugal, in Spain, in all European countries, against the neoliberal policy are the moving force for the victory of the social and political left. Term and condition for this victory is the existence of a united, strong, fighting, organized democratic movement. Without it, the big social change that we seek cannot exist.

Austerity policy and destruction of social structures by neoliberalism can be reversed, if we believe it and organize it having confidence in the forces of European people. The first step can be taken with the triple elections that we have in front of us.

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