

## THE PERMANENT CRISIS IN EDUCATION: ON SOME RECENT STRUGGLES IN GREECE

Capitalist development in Greece during the 60's meant the growth of the secondary sector, namely construction and manufacturing (mainly based on the low cost of labour and not on big investments in fixed capital), the corresponding influx of peasants in the towns and the erosion of local subsistence economies. Gradually, this development created the need for a more skilled and diversified labour power. As a consequence, public education expanded, basic education became obligatory and the population of university students started to rise. Wildcat strikes were on the daily agenda, campaigns on welfare, housing or local issues were organized in almost every neighborhood. This was also the time when struggles for a "free and public education" began.

Reformist class struggles were back on the agenda after the fall of the dictatorship (1974) and education –in particular university education– became the main social climbing "mechanism" since the 70's in Greece, as was the case in the advanced capitalist countries two decades earlier. Students of humble origin, coming from peasant or working class families, could find a permanent post in the public sector or a relatively secure job in the private sector if they possessed a university diploma (and furthermore even acquire a managerial position or set up their own successful small enterprises, especially in the construction sector). Thus, public university has become one of the most important institutions for the integration and satisfaction of "social expectations", with constantly increasing costs for the state budget.

The integration of "popular" demands helped the *legitimization* of the exploitative capitalist relations, which is the one of the two basic functions of the modern democratic capitalist state –its other function being to provide for the smooth course of capitalist accumulation, through the *expanded reproduction* of both labour power and capital. But class struggles during the 70's had the consequence that in the beginning of the 80's the state started to have great difficulties in exercising these two complementary but contradictory functions in a satisfactory way. "Social expectations" haven't been reduced even after the introduction of neoliberal policies in the 90's that aimed to resolve this contradiction through the deepening of divisions inside the working class. This is proved by the constant reappearance of struggles in the education sector.

What follows is the translation of parts of texts we wrote during the last two years. These texts were an attempt at a theoretical analysis of the crisis of the educational system, i.e. the neoliberal restructuring process taking place for years now and the struggles against it. Apart from the university student occupations, another recent struggle that inspired these texts was the six-weeks strike of the primary school teachers in the autumn 2006. Its duration and demands and the fact that some of us participated in this strike urged us to try to analyze it in the general context of the education crisis.

Although primary school teachers in Greece haven't yet felt the pressure of an alienating, standardized and under constant evaluation labour process –like in the U.K. for example– nonetheless there is a growing tendency to make school courses more and more intensive. Curriculums tend to become stricter, new teaching methods have been introduced and, quite recently, new textbooks were imposed on teachers and students with a lot more and more difficult material than previously. The teachers' gradual loss of control over the teaching process is accompanied with the

slow entry of sponsor companies selling educational programmes. On top of all these, there has been an increasing tendency of cutting down education costs, as a part of a general policy of holding public expenses down.

### TEN YEARS AFTER

As we mentioned before, education, as the main capitalist institution that shapes, qualifies and allocates the labour-power commodity in a continuously developing capitalist division of labour, has been expanding in terms of student population since the 60's in Greece. This development has given rise to new "popular" demands, expectations, opportunities of social mobility and individual "successes". It has also led to the accumulation of tensions and contradictions, frustrations and individual "failures" (also called "failures of the schooling system"). Back in 1998, we had participated in the movement against the previous attempt of the state at an education reform that went under the jarring name of "Act 2525". At that time, in the 7<sup>th</sup> issue of our journal we wrote that:

*"The democratization of education that caused a mass production of expectations (and a corresponding temporary 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) created an inevitable structural crisis in the hierarchical division of labour and a crisis of discipline and meaning in school; in other words, a crisis of legitimacy that hard hit state education".<sup>1</sup>*

Ten years after, we are obliged to say that this crisis ...keeps going on. No matter what you call this crisis – a "crisis of legitimacy", a "crisis in the selective-allocating role of education", a "crisis of expectations" or a "crisis in the correspondence of qualifications to career opportunities" – the truth is that education has been seriously crisis ridden and it stands to reason that this situation will be maintained in the next years.



It is precisely the fact that state education is responsible for fulfilling a wide range of functions with great social importance that dooms it to be in a constant state of crisis. To the extent that it has *appropriated* and *integrated* functions which historically were performed by other social institutions (the family, the working class community, the workshop, the corporation), all social conflicts and contradictions manifest themselves in its terrain. Socialization is not confined to the family alone, apprenticeship as a means of imparting knowledge has almost ceased to exist as the task of the guild and individual capitalists do not have the right to organize the basic education of their workforce. As the role of state education is expanding, it is transformed inevitably into a terrain of social struggle, a terrain of class demands and mobilizations (and often, at the level of everyday life, of harsh competition among individuals). Furthermore, the fact that all these conflicts are taking place in the sphere of educational institutions makes them appear as aspects of an *educational*

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<sup>1</sup> Another version of the text where this passage comes from has been translated in English and can be found in the web at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/2379/heavyburden.htm> ("A heavy burden on young shoulders").

*crisis* and not of a *crisis of class exploitative relations*. From this standpoint, even if modern school has lost its monopoly in the *impartment* and *management* of knowledge confronting powerful, and perhaps more alluring, competitors such as the mass media and the Internet, none the less it retains entirely its *social role* (and there is no sign that it can be replaced by any other *social institutions*). On the one hand it is used by the capitalist state as an instrument for the *legitimization and reproduction of class relations*, on the other hand it is used by the working class as an instrument for the *mitigation of divisions and selection*. Both of these two antagonistic objectives aim at the root of the reproduction of capitalist social relations.<sup>2</sup>

The neoliberal attempts to restructure education that took place a decade ago in Greece had been opposed by students', pupils' and teachers' movements. In the aforementioned article, we had tried to give a theoretical account of this (multiple and, more or less, contradictory) response. One of our faults was that we took for granted that the capitalist state would be capable of weathering its crisis. By that time, the plan of the state to weather the crisis was visible; none the less it remained just a plan. Probing into its details, we referred to the various "*educational programs that relate the EC educational directives to a postfordist organization of labour and align job qualifications with educational qualifications in order to train the future multifunctional worker-collaborator, who sees herself as a user/consumer of*



*technological products and services...*"

We also mentioned the role of "*decentralization that is aiming not only at the fragmentation of resistance and social demands but also at the transfer of the education costs to the local communities, as well as at the strengthening of the "autonomy" of the school unit, as a unit of "self-evaluating, collaborating" teaching staff that self-manages the school (maybe with the help of financial sponsors) –possibly in competition to other units*". Finally, we referred to the transformation of the

teacher's identity from that of a state "functionary" –"*a word that is rarely used today, while a few years before it indicated a prestigious identity and an obsolete social-democratic, "humanitarian" self-perception*" –to that of a "professional".

In the case of the tertiary education, we had thought that the attempt to deepen the separation between workers with low qualifications and graduates of universities, as well as between graduates with low and average qualifications and graduates with high qualifications would have been successful. But one shouldn't take at face value the neoliberal propaganda in its attempt to come through the contradictions inherited from the period of social-democracy. It's true that in the beginning, our adversaries gained several victories and, what's more, quite material ones, when they passed Act 2525 in 1997: the abolition of the teachers' list of seniority<sup>3</sup> meant that there began an era when "lifelong training" and precarity would be enforced through the ideology of

<sup>2</sup> In our opinion, views that consider education as a mere "ideological apparatus of the state" are as shallow as piss on concrete. Moreover, we don't regard the state as a simple instrument of the capitalist class. The state is not an independent collective capitalist, but a *moment* of the antagonistic capitalist relation and, therefore, a *terrain of class struggle*.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see "*Heavy burden on young shoulders*".

"meritocracy" and competition, replacing a status quo of formal equality in labour relations; in the case of the secondary education, selection became more intensive with the creation of the new Comprehensive High School on the one hand and the "TEE" (technical institutes) on the other; in the case of the universities the state attempted to establish "lifelong training" through new training programmes (called "PSE") imposing tuition fees.

However, there followed a series of open struggles: the movement of the unemployed teachers and the riots outside examination centers against the abolition of the above mentioned list of seniority; the occupations of secondary schools and universities by pupils and students later that year. There were, also, several invisible reactions and refusals expressed by students, teachers and parents that whittled away the examinational monstrosity of the Comprehensive High School. The result was a relative relaxation of the selective process and a bridging of the separation between the "elite" entering the tertiary education and the "trash" graduating from the technical institutes. Furthermore, the "PSE" university programs were never really implemented and the initial plan for the abolition of the teachers' list of seniority was modified through the creation of a complex appointment system that was constituted of various lists that bypassed the provisions of the 1997 Act.



Due to class struggles, the use of EC money for setting up new university departments in the small towns in order to strengthen local revenues, and the formation and state management of a pool of reserve, complex and cheap labour power for the tertiary sector, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students in higher education. In 1993, only 26.7 percent of greek citizens in an age between 18 and 21 years followed higher education. In 2004, this number had risen to 60.3 percent.

In order to avoid a fiscal crisis, state expenditure on education as a proportion of the GNP remained at the same levels in the last 15 years (fluctuating between 3.5 and 4 percent).

But in order to diminish "social expectations", the state had to do something more. So it changed its education strategy towards a purer neoliberal agenda. The first signs of this change of direction have appeared since the beginning of this decade. Generally, this reorientation consists of two simple formulas: *changes in the running of the education system* (or at least a gradual movement to that direction) and *inadequate state funding* of education. The implementation of the first formula is visible for the time being in primary and secondary education only in the planned cooperation between the public and the private sector in the construction and joint running of the new school buildings. It will probably be manifested in the future in the appearance of companies sponsoring primary and secondary schools, asserting this way their right to participate in the training of their future labour force. The revision of article 16 of the Greek constitution (more on this later) is also part of the same process, with regard to the universities. The reduction of public spending for the education sector is a constant characteristic of neoliberal policies. Nevertheless, it is a

contradictory one condemned to create more problems than those it is supposed to solve. On the one hand, it helps the state to hold down its expenses and accelerate the process of education restructuring, claiming that it is a "social demand". On the other hand, individual capitalists (whether we refer to future sponsors of primary education or owners of private universities) rightfully have the bad reputation of being unable to go beyond their individual interests and place themselves at the disposal of the *general* interests of capitalist accumulation. In other words, because of their priorities an enterprise or even a sector cannot substitute the functions that historically have been assumed by the state.

In addition, neoliberals can hardly hide their vulgarity at the ideological level. "Meritocracy" has been stripped of the mystification of the social-liberal ideology which made claims to a supposed social utility. For neoliberals, the *individual* right to act as if one was a private entrepreneur leads to a historical diminution of the idea of social justice while "society" is perceived as a mere aggregate of individuals (or families-households, as Thatcher used to say) who are supposed to be in a state of constant competition. The problem for neoliberals is that such ideas undermine the basis of their political legitimacy, which in turn brings back the necessity to reinforce the state (and therefore the state provisions for education). It's a vicious circle.



At all levels of education the attempt to transform it into a capitalist enterprise is contradictory but constant. This attempt is visible in nursery schools with the new proposals about intensification of the curriculum and thus the earlier insertion of children in the world of evaluation, quantification and, therefore, *labour*; in secondary education with the proposal – once again– of the National Education Council for a stricter selection of the students of the Comprehensive High

Schools and the channelling of a part of the student population to early training through the "new" technical schools; in the new law for the universities that intensifies work in the partially and silently entrepreneurialized environment of higher public education since the 90's, threatening the unproductive (and thus surplus) intellectual proletariat with expulsion.

Visible and invisible struggles in the previous years have put limits to the capitalist valorization of public education and continue to do so nowadays. The movement of university occupations that broke out in May 2006 and lasted for almost a year is a perfect example of a (spectacularly) visible struggle. In the second case, there belong latent processes that sabotage and undermine the imposed "innovations". E.g., the attempts to transform primary education teachers into "professionals" – executing orders from the Ministry of Education, carrying out "programmes" and projects in order to find sponsors– were faced with rejection. A programme called "Flexible Zone", which was supposed to connect schools to local commercial activities and was presented by the state intellectuals as an attempt to put into practice the old principles of radical and integral education, was never really implemented. Neither the talk about the "connection of school with everyday life", nor the babbling about the "abolition of the teacher-centered model" and the "development of collaboration among students" had any effect. In simple terms, most of the teachers could see that such programmes would deepen the inequalities among pupils since

they were connected with new evaluation systems and, after all, they would impose more unpaid labour on them. In the course of events, it became plain for all to see that the implementation of the aforementioned programme was an issue of immense importance for the Ministry of Education, to the extent that it incorporated the basic lines of its policy: combination of central, bureaucratic control with decentralization, reduction of state funding and internalization of capital's logic while at the same time the participation of sponsors is encouraged in order to find resources for the realization of the projects.

### WHEN THE LAW BREAKS

In this second part, we will try to summarize the actions of resistance against capital's attempts to restructure education in the last few years. As we have already mentioned, the main weapons used by the state are the intensification of student and teacher labour, the inadequate funding of the education sector and the stricter selection. In this manner, the state tries to respond to the crisis of the hierarchical allocation of the labour force that first manifested itself in the mid 80's while at the same time it strives for the continuing legitimization of capitalist social relations –a combination that, let's say it once more, constantly tends to create new crises and contradictions.<sup>4</sup>

The new bill for higher education, that was initially presented in the middle of 2006 (and was finally voted in the midst of the second round of the student movement in March 2007) attempted to legally institutionalize and bolster the existing entrepreneurialization and privatization tendencies in the universities. A series of provisions in this bill promoted the intensification of studies (for example, through setting an upper limit in the allowable years of study) and imposed underpaid or even unpaid student labour (for example, through the granting of student loans and reciprocal scholarships in exchange of part-time employment inside the university). Furthermore, university funding is getting connected with an evaluation process. Also, the attempt to revise article 16 of the greek constitution, in order to permit the establishment of private universities, is intended to win the same end, i.e. to restructure public universities so that they are run more and more like private enterprises. Using the weapon of underfunding and selective funding, the state inserts universities in a competitive environment. This has the consequence that universities are obliged to transform their activities into profit making ones wherever this is possible. The basic criteria of their "good" operation and adequate state funding will be the size of their investments, the kind of research they undertake and their ability to impose the new disciplinary rules and regulations and encourage their students to *individually* invest in human capital.



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<sup>4</sup> Some special contradictions also emerge due to the neoliberal restructuring of education: "*The current neoliberal restructuring of schooling, and its effects on classroom activity, may actually make schooling less functional –and therefore less productive– for capital than in the Fordist era. One would imagine the relatively unconstrained environment of the 1960s university to be more conducive to engendering imaginative social subjects able to communicate and to cooperate –that is, immaterial labourers. The existence of such spaces, which appear (at least) to be partially outside of the capital relation, and upon which capital can draw, may be necessary for capital's development. Indeed, many capitalists prefer employees with "traditional" degrees and A levels to those with "vocational" qualifications, while the Confederation of British Industry opposed the abolition of student grants and the introduction of fees.*" D. Harvie, *Value production and struggle in the classroom: teachers within, against and beyond capital*. Capital & Class #88 (2006).

Last but not least, the new bill changes the definition of the academic sanctuary. Academic sanctuary was the legal product of an earlier cycle of class struggles in Greece. It was introduced in the beginning of the 80's by the "socialist" government as an acknowledgement of the role of the "student" insurrection in 1973 in overthrowing the dictatorship and was one of the measures that intended to recuperate not only the militant student movement but the whole class movement of the 70's. Thanks to the right of sanctuary there have been constant occupations of universities for political campaigns and, to a certain extent, other social uses of university buildings (for example, university rooms in the centre of Athens are used for political presentations, non-commercial parties and so on without permit from the university authorities). The new bill restricts academic sanctuary to the protection of "the right to work" and makes provision for specific penalties. From now on, strikes of the teaching or clerical staff, student occupations etc can be considered as actions that violate the law on academic sanctuary and as such could be repressed by the police.

The university occupations movement broke out in May 2006. Schools and departments entered into the struggle one after the other, and in a very short time almost all universities were occupied. The first round of the student movement managed to postpone the passing of the bill. The occupations started again in January 2007, when the government attempted to revise the article 16 of the constitution and lasted till the end of March. The movement managed to postpone the revision of the constitution for the next two or three years (at all events, the revision process is slow and it requires a large majority backing in the parliament). Nevertheless, the bill became a law in the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, while outside the parliament a fierce riot which lasted for many hours took place. The movement gained some concessions (not



essential ones), but the new law has not been fully enforced yet. There are signs that a new movement may appear when the real enforcement of the law will commence. As far as the qualitative characteristics of the movement are concerned, it is true that occupations were more vivid in terms of

student participation, organization of presentations, workshops and so on, during the first round of the movement and not so much in the second one. There were only a few minority actions that tried to spread the movement into other arenas (like for example blockades or interventions in workplaces like call centers where some students work) but the participation in demonstrations was really massive all over Greece (in the 8<sup>th</sup> of March it is estimated that forty to fifty thousand people participated in the demo).



But in order to understand the reasons why this movement got so massive dimensions, it's not enough to refer only to the changes in the legislation because some of the changes affected mostly future students. It is possible to understand this movement only if we see it as an expression of the accumulated dissatisfaction a whole generation of working class youth has

been experiencing since the previous reforms, ten years ago. These reforms were instrumental in imposing intensified work rates in the school and in the realm of proper wage labour. It is not accidental that the mobilizations broke out in the midst of an examination period. Even if the official spokesmen of the movement never stopped babbling that the academic year "will not be lost" and the examinations will be taken after the movement, the occupations had also the character of an "examination strike", especially during May and June 2006, since a lot of students, both active and "passive" participants in the movement, didn't want to take the exams before the summer vacations, asserting thus their denial of intensified work rates. Furthermore, the mobilized students raised the question of the "free" reproduction of their labour power (even if an contradictory way) through the demand for a "public and free education". This demand was expressed more explicitly by the minority tendencies inside the movement that made the demands for "free board and lodging" as well as for "free transport for all" which were promoted with a few blockades of roads and train stations and some interventions in the metro stations.

Although, the 1997 reform in the secondary education had managed to discipline a generation of students for some years, this was a temporary victory. This generation could not be stopped from expressing its discontent for a life that is increasingly characterized by insecurity and fear. A great part of the students realized that the promises for a "successful career" will be true only for a minority of them. At the same time, they revolted against an everyday activity that looks similar to any other kind of work. This *revolt against student labour* was given a boost by a significant number of students who already experience directly exploitation and alienation as proper wage laborers. In this context, there were interventions for better working conditions in call centres where students work. Nevertheless, this was not a dominant tendency in the movement, since most of the students depend on their parents while many others still hope that in one way or another they will become "professionals". Thus, "workers" were mostly considered as external supporters and it was mainly their parents. Of course, connection with other parts of the working class is directly dependent on the existence of struggles outside the university. For example, when a local struggle for better working and service conditions broke out at a state health centre in a village near Thessaloniki, solidarity was expressed by the students of the Medicine School that were on strike.

The strike of the teachers in primary education was called by the teachers' union during the first round of the student movement after a proposal made by the leftist trade unionists. It must be noted that there was no offensive from the state before the call of the strike. The list of official demands included both wage demands and demands about working conditions. It was a rather huge list of demands but although it came "from above",





and in particular from the leftist group that took the initiative, it nonetheless gave voice to the needs of teachers in an indirect way.

The strike began on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2006 as a 5-day action and lasted for six weeks. The union had no intention to continue the strike after the end of the first week, and this was proved by the attitude of the trade unionists in the general assemblies that took place after the first week of the strike. However, the fact that participation in the strike was very high, especially in Athens and some other urban areas (about 70-80%), as well as the fact that the ministry did not make any concessions, made it very difficult for the union to step back. At this point it may be helpful to note that some teachers in rural areas didn't participate, maybe because they have other jobs as a sideline, e.g. farming.

So, although the strike was called by the union leadership, in the process it became more of a rank-and-file action. Participation remained rather high in some urban areas for the whole period of 6 weeks and during this period massive demonstrations took place at the centre of Athens. On the other hand, participation in the assemblies was not high with the exception of some local union departments. Strike committees were organised right from the start. These committees were mainly executives of the decisions taken in the local assemblies and there was no coordination amongst them. As usual, the assemblies were an arena of various conflicts. The struggle remained under the control of the union and this is partially due to the fact that the leftist group that somehow represents and brings together many radical elements in this sector took over the administration of the union during the strike.

Now, let's turn our attention to the real reasons of the strike and its militancy.

Firstly, we have to stress that teachers cannot be considered a privileged sector of the working class: the entry wage of a teacher is about 900 euros while the minimum wage in Greece is about 700 euros. But the wage demands did not take precedence over all others.

The basic demands that were really made by the rank-and-file were mainly two:

- Higher state expenses for public education;
- and second, an end to the ongoing "marketization of school".



The first demand expresses an outright opposition to the transfer of the costs of reproduction of labour power to the working class. In a way, teachers made a demand on behalf of the whole working class. The straitened conditions and the economic misery of the school is identified in the eyes of the teachers with the misery of the lack of

meaning in their work. The traditional, positive self-perception of the teacher

collapses under the weight of economic neglect and alienation. The fact that all this was not expressed explicitly in the demands while it was evident in a lot of meetings between teachers and parents, in some texts, in discussions and in the streets is indicative of the weakness of the rank-and-file to express itself substantially as well as of its weakness to get rid of the official union spokesmen.

The protests against the "marketization of school" was the second main characteristic of the strike. The coming of the financial sponsors accumulated all the fury of the strikers mystifying the fact that public education is already connected with capital and that this relation cannot be only identified with sponsors. If teachers could manage to overcome this narrow point of view, they could say much about their everyday alienation. Apart from loose words, this feeling against work wasn't articulated into a discourse and it was expressed only through the large duration of the strike. Slogans like "*we will strike till the year 3000*" and "*we give up the next monthly wage, too*" express the desire not to return to the daily alienation of the classroom. Or else it is very difficult to explain the gap separating the large duration of the strike and its militancy and the more or less predictable union demands. Our interpretation of the events is further backed by the fact that this was an offensive strike: without a visible attack from the state and with a list of demands which only indirectly expressed the needs of the strikers, it would otherwise be difficult to understand why many teachers didn't want to go back to work even after six weeks on strike.

Following this line of explanation, we can understand better the wage demands. The demand for a 500 euros wage rise was a demand for compensation for the increasing deterioration of working conditions. As such it was more teacher-centered and sectoral and less a working class demand: slogans around wages appear to say that "work has become impersonal, alienating and intensified – at least it shouldn't be so much underpaid".

Nevertheless, the need to come together with other parts of the working class (mainly parents but also other workers who supported the strike) on a common ground could not be expressed through the demand for a good wage for the teachers (which also implies that intellectual labour is superior to manual). This common ground could only be common needs, that's why the initial demand was transformed into a demand for "*1400 euros for everyone*" in the middle of the strike and was accepted by the majority of teachers then. However, real communication with the "others" was confined to common demos with a minority of students and some meetings with parents organized by the strikers.

As we said, the strike ended after six weeks. Facing the intransigence of the state and not being able to transcend the limits posed by their social role and the union representation, the strikers did not manage to make the extra step that was necessary. But, of course this was not easy: a collective challenge and critique of the alienating and selective nature of education accompanied by a critique of the union would amount to something much more than a strike; it would amount to an insurrection.



The strike didn't win any material concessions, but were there any interesting aspects in it? Our answer will be positive in two aspects.

First, the strike delegitimized to some extent a neoliberal state that claims to guarantee a "qualitative" and "public and free" education system.

Second, at a more educational level, a strike of one and a half months annulled the image of a "smoothly" functioning school system. And what's more, it crashed the image of the teacher as a professional, an organ of the state for the enforcement of its ideological control and a "petit bourgeois" that, supposedly, enjoys his/her privileged position.

Nevertheless, the way that the strike ended with no perspective for the future and no material gains, had negative consequences and clearly shows that a part of the working class cannot gain much if it remains isolated, however militant it is.

This became obvious early this year when the government introduced a new law which was an attack on welfare benefits and pensions. According to this new law on social security, there will be an increase of the retirement age even for mothers with under age kids, a decrease in pension earnings and an increase in the number of stamps needed for medical and sickness insurance, something that hits hard mainly young, part-time and precarious workers. Despite the slashing attack on all workers (students included) the resistance of teachers and students was very weak.

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**TA PAIDIA TIS GALARIAS (TPTG)**