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**The Greek Labour Movement in a Time of Crisis**  
**Perdu dans un océan de dérèglementation ?**  
**Le mouvement ouvrier grec en temps de crise**  
**¿Perdido en un océano de desreglamentación?**  
**El movimiento obrero griego en tiempos de crisis**

Lefteris Kretsos et Markos Vogiatzoglou

Le syndicalisme en quête d'autonomie et de renouvellement en Europe : études de cas : Grèce, Espagne, Portugal et France  
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Résumé de l'article

La crise financière de 2008 a eu un impact énorme sur l'économie et la société grecques. Depuis 2010, de grandes mobilisations populaires ont émergé contre les mesures d'austérité du plan de sauvetage que la troïka des créanciers (UE-BCE-FMI) a proposé aux gouvernements grecs. Pourtant, les syndicats institutionnels ont échoué à empêcher la réduction des revenus des salariés, à hauteur de 50% en 2013 par rapport à ceux de 2008. En outre, ils furent largement incapables de confirmer leur rôle de leader dans les mobilisations des classes ouvrières et des salariés. Dans cet article, nous examinons les raisons de l'échec des syndicats institutionnels à répondre de manière adéquate au défi de l'austérité. Nous considérons que l'explication de cet échec réside dans les défis et les problèmes génériques auxquels les syndicats contemporains sont confrontés — dont la littérature internationale a documenté le sujet —, ainsi que dans les particularités et les caractéristiques spécifiques du contexte socio-politique grec. Ensuite, nous étudions les alternatives proposées par des groupes de militants et des travailleurs de la base, par exemple, des associations de quartier formées par des travailleurs, des syndicats d'entreprise composés par des travailleurs précaires et des entreprises autogérées en état d'occupation. Après avoir identifié les points forts de leur contribution, ainsi que les problèmes et les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés, nous concluons qu'une approche diversifiée et innovante est requise, au nom du mouvement ouvrier, afin de simultanément tenir compte et exploiter toute source de pouvoir ouvrier. L'article conclut qu'un processus de rapprochement stratégique entre les syndicats traditionnels et radicaux est nécessaire en Grèce.

# Lost in the Ocean of Deregulation? The Greek Labour Movement in a Time of Crisis

Lefteris Kretsos and Markos Vogiatzoglou

**This article examines the reasons for the failure of institutional trade unions to adequately address the austerity and neoliberal restructuring challenge that emerged in Greece after the 2010 bail-out agreement. The alternatives proposed by militant, grassroots labour organization are investigated. After identifying the strong points of the latter's contributions, as well as the problems and challenges they are facing, the authors conclude that a diversified and innovative approach is required on the part of the labour movement in order to simultaneously address and exploit all sources of workers' power. The emergence of radical unionism in large urban areas is a fortunate development, but cannot be transplanted as a recipe for success in itself. A process of strategic rapprochement between mainstream and radical unions in Greece is necessary.**

**KEYWORDS:** Trade unions, social unionism, precariousness, grassroots unions, Greece.

## Introduction

In late 2009, Greece was priced out of the international financial markets. After a few months (May 2010), the Greek government received financial assistance from the European Union (European Commission), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—the so-called Troika. This assistance was based on the condition that the Greek government would put in place one of the most radical structural adjustment programs ever implemented in Europe. In this context, the peculiar position of Greece on the global map of marketization is related to both economic and political reasons and an exceedingly fast-moving play of reforms and restructuring imposed by the international lenders and Greek authorities.

Since 2010, labour standards in Greece have been subject to decline (Kretsos, 2014). The sovereign debt crisis has become a powerful lever of the

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growing precariousness of employment and the increasing fragility of protective regulations at work. This development is partly related to the incapacity of mainstream trade unions to mobilize rank-and-file members to resist the ongoing deterioration in workplace conditions and the systemic erosion of workers' power. As Hyman argues, "on the bottom line, all institutionalized rights rely on the power balances on the shop floor, thus on the militancy of grassroots union members" (Hyman, 1975: 159).

This article examines the reasons for the failure of institutional trade unions to adequately address the austerity and neoliberal restructuring challenge (Greer and Doellgast, 2013; Dedoussopoulos *et al.*, 2013). In doing so, it will also investigate the alternatives proposed by militant, grassroots labour organizations. After identifying the strong points of the latter's contributions, as well as the problems and challenges they are facing, we conclude that a diversified and innovative approach is required on the part of the labour movement in order to simultaneously address and exploit all sources of workers' power. The emergence of radical unionism in large urban areas is a fortunate development, but cannot be transplanted as a recipe for success in itself.

The empirical data of this paper derive from the research both authors have been conducting on the Greek trade union movement. The research method employed is the triangulation of qualitative research methods, namely, an archival search of trade unions' announcements, press releases and other printed and online material; 45 semi-structured interviews with union members and leaders, conducted between 2008 and 2013; and field-notes based on participant observation of trade union and other social movement activities in Athens and Thessaloniki during the entire period under study.

The departure point of our analysis of radical trade unions in Greece is not limited to emphasizing the role of union activists at the grassroots level. Neither do we assert a romanticized conception of radical unionism in comparison to the bureaucratic conservatism of mainstream trade unions. We do not consider that the differences between Greek and other European trade unions can be explained by the varieties of capitalism model (Baccaro and Howell, 2011; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Voskeritsian and Kornelakis, 2011). Our analysis, rather, is influenced by several power analysis scholars who take into account the role of the state and the contemporary dynamics of the marketization project, as well as the political realities and the state of class relations (Connolly and Darlington, 2012; Greer and Doellgast, 2013; Upchurch, Taylor, and Mathers, 2009). As Rainnie and Ellem (2006) have argued, the reorientation of trade union identities, approaches and strategies is strongly related to certain political realities and changes in the political balance of power. This path of analysis is essential for a country with a heavily politicized industrial relations environment

that is undergoing serious and ongoing restructuring exercises, as is the case of Greece (Kretsos, 2011).

In the absence of a tradition of implementing organizing and recruitment strategies, large trade unions in Greece have focused on two fields of action: collective bargaining and general strike activity. However, this overemphasis on general strike activity and lobbying strategies aimed at influencing major political parties has not been effective in improving the situation for an increasingly precarious workforce in the Greek employment landscape. Since the implementation of the Troika policies, this situation has been exacerbated. A dependence on strong and powerful leaders to negotiate wage increases is no longer bearing fruit, even for the most protected parts of the workforce such as public sector workers and older workers in ex-utilities. The new governance established under the strict Troika rules has led to a pandemic of work precariousness which has, in turn, resulted in a serious crisis in mainstream trade unionism.

This article is organized as follows. The next part presents the impact of the economic and social reforms implemented since the upsurge of the economic crisis in 2010. The third section discusses the reactions of mainstream trade union organizations to the austerity measures and the economic restructuring policies that followed. Part four discusses the emergence of militant trade unions as new industrial relations actors in the anti-austerity movement across the country and especially in the large urban area of Athens. Part five examines future challenges and risks for radicalized and militant union organizations in Greece. The last section presents our conclusions.

## **A fragile economic and political situation**

At the time of writing, Greece's economic performance remains devastating. According to the data of the national statistical authorities (ELSTAT), the public debt stood at 175.7% at the close of 2013, despite the fact that the majority of memorandum commitments were met on time. A drop in the GDP growth rate of more than 25% since 2008 has seriously dented the productive capacity of the Greek economy (OECD, 2014). Real incomes have declined and the population facing the risk of poverty has risen dramatically (INE-GSEE, 2013). According to the OECD (2014), total household income in Greece dropped by one third between 2007 and 2012. This drop in income is the largest in the OECD and four times as large as that recorded in the average Eurozone country.

Along these lines, non-performing loans (NPLs) continue to expand to historically unprecedented levels.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment has in turn risen to 28.1%, while youth unemployment is as high as 62.1% (OECD, 2014). At the same time, in 2013, the rate of those at risk of poverty reached 35.7%, or almost 4 million

people.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the social impact of fiscal consolidation has been aggravated by the lack of a general safety net, as well as low social spending and a traditionally weak welfare state (Petmesidou, 2013). Indeed, according to the OECD (2013), the Greek social protection system has been characterized by the fragmentation of benefits with limited targeting and benefits are largely restricted to those covered by the social security system. It thus excludes young people and the long-term unemployed, as well as low-income households.

In general, almost all headline macroeconomic and social well-being indicators (Karanikolos *et al.*, 2013; Kretsos, 2014; Burgi, 2014; OECD, 2014) have been signalling dramatic changes and unfortunate developments for trade unions and the vast majority of working people in Greece. The therapy has proven to be more harmful than the disease and most working people in Greece have seen their lives turned upside down in a matter of months. In this context, trade unions have had to act as firefighters trying to deal with many hostile fronts at the same time, at the fault lines of the political consensus that prevailed in recent decades.

### **Trade unions at a crossroads**

During the last decades, scholars from various observation points have identified and attempted to explain the noted decline in union membership, strike activity and the percentage of the labour population covered by collective agreements (Clyde, 1982; Edwards, Garonna, and Tödtling, 1986; Mellor, 1990). In a longitudinal study investigating 16 Western European countries from 1950 to 1995, Ebbinghaus and Visser (2000) argued that the “cyclical models” developed to explain this crisis were insufficient. They instead proposed an explanatory model that takes into account institutional factors such as “the access of unions to representation in the workplace; the availability of a selective incentive in the form of a union-administered unemployment scheme; recognition of employers through nationwide and sectoral corporatist institutions; and closed-shop arrangements for forced membership” (*ibid.*: 135). Using data from the European Social Survey, Schnabel and Wagner (2005) identified several key variables that strongly affect union density at a cross-national level. These are; the personal attitudes of workers (toward their job and the workplace) and employees’ belief (or lack thereof) that a strong union is necessary to better serve their interests, but also, and perhaps most importantly, workplace characteristics. Moreover, in addition to the institutional setting, individual traits and workplace characteristics recognized as playing a key role in this union crisis, many scholars have acknowledged the inability of unions to recruit and mobilize the unprotected flexible labour force (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 2000; Martin and Ross, 1999; Waddington and Hoffmann, 2000).

Potential solutions to this and other problems identified constitute yet another body of literature, proposing ways out of the union crisis (for a summary of the 'Union Revitalization' literature, see Behrens, Hamann, and Hudd, 2004). Researchers have suggested changes to be implemented in internal union organizational schemes, pointing out case-study level successes when unions have adopted a more flexible approach to the on-the-spot presence of union representatives and shop stewards (Charlwood, 2004; Clawson and Clawson, 1999; Fairbrother *et al.*, 2007). Others have recommended a more "inclusive" and open-minded policy on the part of unions with regard to recruiting new members, especially low-wage, flexible workers who are subject to discrimination (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010; Oxenbridge, 2000).

In another parallel stream of the literature, several scholars have observed (and/or suggested) an increased collaboration and cross-fertilization of trade unions and non-workplace social movement organizations (SMOs). Fitzgerald and Hardy have stressed "the importance of new linkages locally, regionally, nationally and internationally in organizing these new labour market entrants [migrants and flexible workers]" (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010: 131); Waterman (2004) and his colleagues proposed the model of international social movement unionism, wherein the desired connection between the SMOs and the unions is so strong (even at the international level), that the limits between the two are hard to distinguish (Waterman and Wills, 2001). Ross defines social unionism as "generally understood to involve both engagement with social justice struggles beyond the workplace and methods of union activity beyond the collective bargaining process" (S. Ross, 2007: 17).

Lowell Turner summarizes all of the above proposals as follows: "The most significant revitalization strategies identified in our country cases are organizing, labour-management partnership, political action, reform of union structures, coalition-building and international solidarity" (2004: 4). It is interesting to note that Turner presents the above as real-life strategies already being adopted by unions. We consider that this is also the case with respect to the more advanced examples of organized labour activity in Greece, and propose an examination along these lines (see sections 4 and 5). However, first, it is worth investigating how the formal trade union system in Greece has responded to the austerity challenge and how its inherent weaknesses have left the path open for new actors to emerge in the field.

Broadly speaking, the labour movement in Greece has been grappling with how best to renew itself after decades of declining union density. The OECD estimated union density in Greece in 2011 to be 25.4% (OECD, 2013). The European Industrial Relations' Observatory has calculated union density in Greece to be approximately 28%, mentioning that "[i]n the private sector, the density

does not appear to be higher than 18% or around 472,304 workers, on the basis of 2007 data" (Stamati, 2013). Nevertheless, the discussion on trade union revitalization in Greece demands specific analytical frames to avoid the typical methodological trap of translating or fetishizing union praxis with a paradigmatic methodological nationalism that is inherent in much of the industrial relations literature. Emphasis on the historical dimensions and the peculiar characteristics of the class struggle and industrial relations system is necessary to map and analyze the contemporary union landscape in Greece.

Trade unions in Greece are organized around two major confederations, the GSEE for private sector workers and the ADEDY for public sector workers.<sup>3</sup> At the base of the system are the so-called primary unions, i.e. company-based, industry-sector and professional trade union organizations. The second level consists of Labour Centres, based in each region's capital—which coordinate union activity at the regional level—and industry sector federations. The third level of the trade union system consists of the GSEE and ADEDY boards, as well as their Audit Committees, their General Council and several Secretariats (GSEE, 2013). Greek unions are politicized; the GSEE and ADEDY are pluralist in political terms, with their main fractions being affiliated or politically close to the main parties in the country. Currently, both the GSEE and ADEDY are controlled by a majority formed around the social-democratic PASKE fraction. In recent years (also preceding the crisis), the main lines of activity of both confederations have been centred on collective bargaining, on the one hand, and calling general strikes, on the other.

With regard to collective bargaining, and according to Zambarloukou (2006), Greece stands as an exemplar case of "state corporatism" following a long period of direct state interventionism that stigmatized collective bargaining structures and trade unions functioning. Furthermore, historical and political conditions promoted a peculiar interconnection between first-class union leaderships and strong bourgeois political parties based on a post-dictatorship social democratic consensus and an "exchange of gifts," the price of which has been an increasingly precarious workforce (Ioannou, 2000; Kretsos, 2011). Other scholars maintain that trade unions were "colonized" by strong political parties that imposed their clientelistic logics through interpersonal connections with union leadership and distinctive organized trade union fractions (Lavdas, 2005). Thus, although trade unions challenged sometimes significant efforts of marketization in the pre-crisis period through strike action (e.g. proposing social security reforms in 2003), they remained among the main stakeholders of the mainstream political and institutional order in Greece, reflecting the public discourse and perception of trade unions as "political dinosaurs."

When it comes to general strikes, Greece represents an ideal study case because mainstream trade union resistance to structural labour market reforms

has been largely restricted to frequent general strike activity. Not surprisingly, Greek trade unions are famous for being active in this field. According to Kelly and Hamman (2010), 38 out of 98, or 44%, of all the general strikes across Europe between 1980 and 2008 took place in Greece. This bold finding indicates an adversarial industrial relations system and a strong and militant trade union movement. Nevertheless, this account neglects the idiosyncratic mechanisms and dynamics of the organized labour praxis, as the organization of a general strike in Greece has not been as demanding a mission to accomplish as in other European countries, both in terms of legal procedural aspects and preparatory actions. In the vast majority of cases, general strikes have been associated with limited performance in terms of protest participation. Moreover, general strikes can be called by a simple decision on the part of the leadership of the Greek General Confederation of Workers (GSEE). In addition, this type of mobilization by the leadership of the major unions has traditionally been more attractive given the absence of workplace level union representation and the extremely low levels of union density in the private sector, even long before the crisis. These developments are in turn related to restrictive labour law rules with regard to forming and sustaining a workplace union (at least 21 members are necessary whereas 92% of companies have fewer than 20 employees).

To put it simply, the regulatory rules have allowed for legal union busting methods with the iron rule of 21 members and the inefficiencies of the Labour Inspectors Corp (Kapsalis, 2013). The supposedly protective regulatory framework has also given power to a peculiar interconnection between first class union leaderships and strong bourgeois political parties. This condition has in turn blocked a radical strategic reorientation of the Greek trade unions that could have placed greater emphasis on organizing and attracting young and other precarious workers<sup>4</sup> through more appropriate representation structures and engagement strategies at the workplace level.

In the same vein, collective bargaining strategies at the national and sectorial level have been driven by the individual decisions of those at the top of the union hierarchy. Lack of transparency regarding how these decisions are made via strong internal union democracy buffers (leadership rotation, open-public meetings, no statutory financial control of trade union organizations, strong interaction between the major political parties<sup>5</sup> and the leaders of the large trade union confederations, etc.) have strengthened the lobbying strategies used by the union leadership and the political parties in power. Such strategies have been promoted at the expense of direct action in the workplace and inclusive organizing and mobilizing strategies. Therefore, how best to expand the membership base (Behrens *et al.*, 2004) or “organize the unorganized” (Fairbrother and Yates, 2013) still remains an unexplored and low priority issue for the labour movement in Greece.



To some extent, this development echoes Baccaro *et al*'s (2003: 119) assertion that union strategies depend to a significant extent on the institutional resources available to them, including access to the policy-making sphere. If unions find or build adequate political and institutional supports, they have less incentive to mobilize the membership, organize the unorganized, build coalitions with other groups, or give support to grassroots initiatives.

Nevertheless, certain national peculiarities are worth mentioning. For example, in the last two decades, it has been common practice in Greece for union leaders to become Ministers of Employment and members of parliament after their retirement from the union leadership. Big names in mainstream trade union organizations have had all the freedom to act as political and trade union agents promoting their own interests as well as mainly bread and butter union claims for their members while ignoring ideological aspects of union activity and the needs of certain workforce groups suffering from poor working conditions and low pay in the private sector.

The case of migrant and young workers is indicative of this trade union recruiting and organizing inertia. Migrant workers from Africa and Asia were overrepresented during 1990s and mid 2000s in the booming industries of construction and agriculture. At that time, Greece was listed among the European nations with the highest total number of international migrants living within their borders (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004). Nevertheless, the disorganized nature of immigration usually led to "opportunities" for the employers only. This new reserve army of labour remained without a union voice or union representation, which, in turn, resulted in the development of direct employer control and a pre-capitalist set of characteristics leading to exploitation at work.<sup>6</sup>

Young workers, for their part, have remained highly unorganized, and traditional forms of regulation and union representation have been ineffective in protecting them from the risk of vulnerability at work. As Lampousaki (2010) has argued: "[N]o campaigns have been held at the third level (GSEE and ADEDY) for the direct purpose of attracting new members." Furthermore, no major trade union organization in Greece has advertised and offered a position as an organizer or campaign coordinator such as exists in similar organizations in other countries, as attested, for example, by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) Organizers Academy. Indicative also is the fact that the GSEE does not collect data on the age of their members. Nor do either of the large confederations have any systematic approach to organizing any specific groups.

The GSEE has instead established a Young Workers Committee that organizes specific events and activities (information campaigns, summer camps, lobbying, etc.) at the national and international levels. Such structures, however, do not appear to be enough to tackle the problem of the under-representation of young

precarious workers in the workplace. Indeed, they tend to act as discussion forums rather than targeting certain types of employers and focusing on the particular problems and working conditions of young workers in nonstandard jobs. The GSEE'S Youth Workers Committee does not have the financial autonomy or resources enjoyed by equivalent Committees in other European countries (Vandaele, 2013). This weakens its ability to systematically organize national campaigns that could either increase the level of union inclusion of precarious workers or influence the public discourse with the potential positive spill-over effects for the level of inclusion of young workers in the future.

Not surprisingly, the emergence of a precarious workforce, composed mainly of young, female migrant workers, was observed in Greece long before the crisis. The inequalities associated with a tradition of an inadequate welfare state and low social transfers (Guillén and Matsaganis, 2000) became more evident with the outbreak of the crisis. As a result, the prospects for conflict-based alternative political and trade union organizing became greater, including a restoration, or attempted restoration, of more radical social resistance to imposed austerity measures. The assembly-based democracy exercises during the massive mobilizations in Syntagma Square in May-June 2011 are a striking example of this.

Since 2010, strikes and protests have become not only more passionate and frequent, but, for the first time, have been driven by a new industrial relations actor in post-IMF Greece: strong networks of rank and file activists and self-organized communities. These networks have enlarged the playing field of union and social movement praxis to unprecedented levels, resulting in numerous examples of inspiring resistance: self-governed hospitals (General Hospital of Kilkis), community medical centres (Elliniko, Peristeri, etc.), occupied factories (Xalivourgiki), self-management experiments (VIOME), growing networks of part alternative currency/part barter system markets, various local communities on the barricades (Keratea, Chalkidiki) and ongoing blockades of ministries and companies' headquarters (cleaners) or other state owned premises (ERT). These resistance experiences have not managed to block Troika's reform plans but have brought to light a litany of woes that are crying out to be addressed. In the next part we will explain why this is the case.

## **The emergence of new actors in the labour field**

As the established trade unions have been forced to recede to a secondary role in the anti-austerity mobilization, new actors have emerged to cover the structural gap. These actors fall outside the schemes of the mainstream trade unions in Greece. The most important among them are militant, grassroots union organizations, informal workers' collectives and experimental cooperatives

and self-management projects. The former began to emerge in the mid-90s. As flexible contracts were introduced in the Greek labour market, following the developments on a pan-European scale (Ioannou, 2000) and combined with the traditionally weak Greek welfare state, this workplace flexibilization produced a new labour population category, that is, employees who were simultaneously flexible *and* unprotected. This workforce, referred to as “precarious” workers in the international literature (see, for example, Choi and Mattoni, 2010; Ross, 2008; Standing, 2013) was commonly unorganized, either due to the fact that the jobs it occupied were newly created, or because the union presence was weak in the workplaces where flexible labour prevailed (Vogiatzoglou, 2010).

Since the late 1990s, however, unionization procedures have been launched in various industry sectors. The first two grassroots, company-based unions were founded in a catering service and a courier company. Similar initiatives were soon undertaken in other companies in the above sectors as well as others, including telecommunications, private schools, cleaning services and publishing houses. The founding members of these organizations met with one another both inside and outside the workplace. As stated by K.G., a member of *Diakoptes*, a collective of audiovisual sector technicians (later absorbed into a sector-based primary union co-founded by its members):

This group began operating in early 2009. We somehow met each other during the December Riots’ rebellion,<sup>7</sup> or perhaps when it ended, a group of anti-authoritarians and anarchists, who had in common the fact that we were working in the same industry sector – show business. And we created this initiative, *Diakoptes*. [Interview with K.G., 2010, trans.]

These grassroots organizations operate at the enterprise- or industry sector-level; we will henceforth referred to them as precarious workers’ unions (PWUs).

The PWUs developed a diverse action repertoire throughout the 2000s. In 2004, the Wage-Earner Technicians’ Union (SMT) succeeded in including, in a collective agreement signed with employers, the extension of the agreements’ provisions to technicians who did not formally hold the dependent employee status, but were rather considered to be “associates” or “free-lancers” (see: Wage Earner Technicians’ Union, 2007). During the entire decade of the 2000’s, the Cleaning Personnel Union of Attica (PEKOP) staged a campaign against the mafia-like companies operating in the field, exposing their exploitation of workers and illegal practices (PEKOP, 2013). The price the union paid for its involvement was high: Konstantina Kouneva, a high-profile activist, was attacked by the employers’ henchmen with acid, an assault that almost cost her her life and left her severely injured (indy.gr, 2008). The Waiters, Chefs and Catering Personnel Union of Thessaloniki chose a different path towards limiting “black market” exploitation: they staged a series of protests, pickets and blockades outside bars

and restaurants where accusations of illegal practices had been raised, in order to bring negative media attention to the employer.

Until very recently, coalition-building among trade unions in Greece was two-fold: the unions would either engage in solidarity networks with other organizations operating in the same area, industry sector or professional field (that is, through the official union structure in Greece), or, as mentioned above, exploit their privileged relations with political parties (mainly through the overlapping memberships of their leaders) to gain political support for their cause (Kassimati, 1997; Kouzis, 2006; Kouzis, 2007). The emergence of precarious workers' unions signalled a break from this well-established tradition. First, the latter lacked any links with the main parties of Greece's previously bipolar political system. As is the case of every primary union in Greece, the various fractions of the political spectrum are represented in the PWU apparatuses. Yet the PWUs are generally characterized by a prevalence of left-wing unionists, as well as the notable strength of extra-parliamentary left-wing and anarchist forces. Secondly, the PWUs developed a complex, often contentious relationship with their Confederation. Given the fact that the GSEE is the only private-sector union confederation, it is by default pluralist in political terms. This trait allows for a relative degree of autonomy with regard to the primary unions' activities and strategies. The PWUs have always been suspicious of formal trade union bureaucracies—the GSEE leadership majority becoming a favourite target of criticism. As will be shown below, in 2009, several PWUs moved a step forward, founding a horizontal primary union Coordinating Body, as an alternative to the GSEE's coordination structures. Lastly, another important characteristic of the PWUs with regard to their networking is their relative isolation, as they operate in industry sectors where the level of unionization has been low.

As documented by Vogiatzoglou (2011), the allies' network of the PWUs expands beyond the—perceived as “natural”—overlapping memberships' network of union leaders and founders. The expansion procedure includes the involvement of various actors, trade unions and social movement organizations (SMOs), on a voluntary basis, is conducted mostly through jointly organized events, and intensifies during periods of labour dispute and industrial action. A more formalized (and temporally persistent) version of the same process can be found in the horizontal co-ordination efforts launched by the Athens-based PWUs in early 2009, when the Coordinating Body was formed. The founding unions and unionists represent industry sectors ranging from the public health system to engineering, education and telecommunications. The operation of the Coordinating Body is based on open assembly (there is no formal hierarchy).

The Athenian Coordinating Body was soon replicated in other Greek cities; these bodies were the first major instances in decades of workers organizing

beyond the GSEE structures. It is important to note, however, that *beyond* the GSEE means neither antagonizing it, nor placing oneself outside the official trade union system. Indeed, although the opinions of PWU leaders range from simple political opposition to total defiance of the Confederation strategies and *modus operandi*, most PWUs participate in the GSEE apparatuses.

Another important characteristic of PWU networking is that, due to the relative bargaining weakness of their members and the fact that their leaders and founders had significant previous experience of involvement in the movement, they immediately engaged in intensive networking with other, non-labour-related organizations in Greece (SMOs). This close link proved invaluable when the anti-austerity movement emerged. On the one hand, the Athenian Coordinating Body organized a large union assembly and, separately from the GSEE, launched a call (at a separate meeting point) for the General Strike demonstrations. The message conveyed to the potential protesters was that it was possible to participate in the anti-austerity protest without identifying with the Confederation, which was considered to be “government-friendly” and ineffective. As K.V., a primary union leader participating in the Coordinating Body’s assemblies recalls:

During the austerity years, the Coordinating Body had a distinct and decisive presence in all the major struggles—this includes its participation in all the general strikes, as well as the occupation of Syntagma, in Athens. Therefore, it is now widely recognized among workers as a pole that is distinct from the employer-friendly and bureaucratic unionism of the GSEE. [Interview with K.V., 2013, trans.]

This call was soon embraced by many other organizations, including small left-wing parties, student unions and even NGOs. The outcome was impressive: while the alternative to the GSEE call gathered tens, and occasionally hundreds of thousands of protesters at their meeting point—thus spearheading all the anti-austerity marches—the GSEE itself never managed to gather more than ten thousand participants at the their starting point.

On the other hand, PWU members participated massively in the movement’s non-labour-related actions, offering their expertise and technical skills to the movement’s services. For example, the audiovisual workers’ collective, *Diakoptes*, played a role in setting up the *Syntagma* Square media team, freelance programmers and network technicians from the telecommunications’ unions provided the internet infrastructure in the occupied square, and the Waiters, Chefs and Catering Union of Athens was the first to set up a “strike soup kitchen” in 2010—soon to be followed by many other collectives which have since continued to provide free meals to the impoverished population. Finally, it is not surprising that many PWU members, leaders and founders are among the activists who populate the *experimental laboratories* of worker organizing.

The second type of labour organizations relevant to our study is what we refer to as the “experimental laboratories” of Greek trade unionism. This category includes informal labour collectives, cooperatives and self-management projects. The first and perhaps most prominent among these experimental laboratories are the “Workers’ Clubs” (*Ergatikes Leshes*) that have sprung up recently in various neighbourhoods of Athens. In a similar fashion to the US-based Workers Centers’ experience of the mid-90s (Fine, 2006), these Workers’ Clubs aim to extend the labour struggle beyond the limits of the workplace. Their flexible structure and local focus allows them to approach two population categories that remain unreachable for traditional trade unions: the workers of very small companies and the unemployed, who are invited to participate in the various activities of the Club. As one member of the *Nea Smyrni* Workers’ Club (WCNS) stated:

The Workers’ Club wants to become a “city union,” which will complement, rather than substitute, the working class unionism inside the labour space. At the same time, it will unite the city’s workers and the unemployed in this struggle. [Interview with WCNS, 2012, trans.]

Then there are the self-managed, occupied and recuperated companies. The most important projects are the VIOME factory in Thessaloniki and the Public Television and Radio (ERT) in various cities of Greece. Both companies were shut down by their respective employers but re-launched their activities under worker control. VIOME founded a cooperative in order to legally distribute their product, while the ERT employees continue broadcasting their radio and television programs from many studios around Greece, despite the eviction from their headquarters in Athens. Of course, the self-managed factory does not constitute a new idea at the international level, but it is important to keep in mind that such advanced proposals were never present in the Greek labour movement’s debate. Makis Anagnostou, a VIOME worker, describes how their self-managed factory is organized:

We took a decision of full equality among workers, equal wages for all, regardless of the type of work one does. What we said is: one factory stock per worker, one vote per worker. [...] Finally, we decided that the factory management may be recalled at any time. The same goes for the trade union’s board. This is what we call a cooperative enterprise under worker control. (quoted in: Papadatos-Anagnostopoulos and Vogiatzoglou, 2013, trans.)

Finally, the dozens of cooperatives that have recently been founded should not be ignored. These cooperatives provide a wide range of products and services, from agricultural products to computer repairs, courier services, bars and restaurants. It is important to note the lack of any previous cooperativism experience in Greece. Similarly, the Greeks are unaware of the cooperatives’ transformation, such as in Spain and Italy, into mechanisms of labour exploitation and tax evasion.

## Problems and challenges for the future

We will now turn to the problems and limitations these grassroots organizations are facing. Despite the encouraging developments mentioned above, all these new actors are facing various difficulties expanding their activities and scope. First, with regard to the PWUs: on the one hand, the relative autonomy these organizations have secured from political parties and the government has come at a price. They have minimal access to labour market regulatory institutions. On the other hand, there is a problem of scale of intervention. To date, these entities are limited to specific workplaces, industry sectors or neighbourhoods; scarce attempts to upgrade their presence to a broader, nation-wide level have not produced any impressive outcomes.

Second, a major challenge faced by the grassroots unions is how to maintain a high degree of internal democracy while consolidating a wide and flexible inter-union organization. Some of the participants in the Athenian Coordinating Body have expressed the concern that this Body runs the risk of being bureaucratized; the rivalry of the political parties involved is contributing in this regard (one should keep in mind that most Greek union organizations are highly politicized, albeit in a pluralist way). As stated by K.V.:

I'm afraid we're also getting more bureaucratic. SYRIZA<sup>8</sup> is always trying to control the Coordinating Body. And we [the extra-parliamentary left-wing] are operating as a fraction. [...] It somehow seems like a top-down initiative. We should push in the direction of keeping our grassroots characteristics. [Interview with K.V., 2013, trans.]

Furthermore, although the PWUs have been much more effective in employing their own movement repertoire than the GSEE, they still have to devise a repertoire that will go beyond the "traditional" set of labour actions. As the PWUs mainly operate *inside* the workplace, their repertoire is mostly centered on workplace-based activities, such as organizing strikes, picketing and distributing informative material to workers. Their outward-looking actions rarely go beyond their participation in protests and strike demonstrations. In this sense, it becomes harder for the casual observer to distinguish between the PWUs and the institutional trade unions, the former's rhetoric radicalism aside. Moreover, after the numerical explosion noted in 2008-2009 (Vogiatzoglou, 2011), both in terms of organizational bodies and union members, their population seems to have stabilized, if not weakened in several cases. This may be attributed to the high level of unemployment (approx. 28% of the entire workforce, more than 60% of youth), which produces counter-incentives to unionization. Finally, it is beyond any doubt that the organizational format of the PWUs is unsuitable for mobilizing the vast numbers of unemployed workers.

With regard to the experimental laboratories, it is unlikely that any of the above mentioned proposals and projects, in their current form, could prove to

be a long-term recipe for the revitalization of the Greek labour movement. The Workers' Clubs are still few in number and, as mentioned above, perceive themselves to be complementary to other union structures. Based on the international experience, it is highly probable that, even if the occupied companies survive, they will remain in the margins of the productive system. The same goes for the cooperatives, which are facing the extra risk of sacrificing their democratic characteristics to increase their competitiveness. It is also important to keep in mind that many of the projects mentioned are informal, in the sense that their legal form and activity is not recognized by the labour legislation. This has severe implications, especially for the workplace-based organizations, as a lack of institutional recognition means minimal bargaining capacity, i.e. minimal possibility to offer *any* sort of services to their members.

Therefore, reforming the Greek trade union system cannot only be perceived as a "bottom-up" issue: legislative initiatives will also be required, such as unblocking the frozen traditional trade union structures and integrating the most pertinent experiments in a coherent and productive way. Clearly, it is highly unlikely that the official trade union structures will become obsolete to the degree of facing extinction. One may be confident that no major actor would opt for such a development, certainly not the government or the employers. A weak and socially discredited trade union system is preferable to the turmoil that no official representation at all would bring. Yet, given the combined continuous weakening of the institutional trade union system, in terms of power, as well as the absence of the social dialogue structures that defined the Greek labour field during the last few decades, there seem to be just two ways forward: either the trade unions will fall back into an even less relevant role in the societal processes, or major structural changes will be designed and implemented. These changes will have to take place in an environment wherein the intertwinement between trade unions and social movements is characterized by multi-faceted processes and a high degree of complexity.

## Conclusions

The lost capacity of traditional union efforts to improve conditions for disengaged workers who have little or no say in organizing or bargaining over wages, benefits and conditions or even the right to defend themselves against employer attacks, has opened the door for greater imagination in union praxis and a return to the class-based roots of the labour movement. As Rainnie and Ellem (2006: 23) have suggested "labour movements at whatever level have to experience near terminal crisis before the rigidities of old structures, attitudes and activities can be opened up to new and challenging ways of organizing."



This development is reflected in the gradual rise, over recent years, of numerous militant trade unions outside the official structures of the GSEE, and the increasing popularity of radical left-wing union fractions within the GSEE membership constituencies. The vast majority of these union organizations have all the characteristics of social movement unionism as defined by Moody (1997) and Fairbrother (2008), that is, they are militant in collective bargaining, deeply democratic and participative, in close cooperation with other movements and groups within the community, and finally, they embrace emancipatory politics, frame demands politically, and formulate transformative visions by placing an importance on rank-and-file activism.

Furthermore, left-wing and other radical trade union fractions affiliated mainly with SYRIZA, the radical left-wing party recently elected to government, have managed to win many local and federal elections, including among teachers, hospital doctors and private sector employees. These trade unions used to be the fortress of bureaucratic unionism affiliated with the social democratic PASOK party.

In this context, community organizing, working with local assemblies and coalition-building strategies with broader social groups and networks of activists may not be as prominent as they were in 2011, but they have established a strong foothold in the landscape of Greek unionism and are no longer its abandoned children. Radical unionism and “street politics” are exerting strong pressures on the existing bureaucratic trade union structures to contest the obscene inequalities in Greek society.

The major issue after the recent electoral victory of the left-wing SYRIZA party and the expected abandonment of austerity is to ascertain how all the energies spent and fights undertaken over the last five years can produce lasting political effects. The recent “citizen awakening” is in danger if SYRIZA cannot maintain its militant anti-austerity impulse. This awakening is also in danger if radical unions do not move to the next step of clarifying tangible objectives and clear strategies for securing lasting links among the multifarious constituencies of the anti-austerity movement and progressive political parties. In this context, the unfolding of a process of strategic rapprochement between mainstream and radical unions in Greece is necessary.

## Notes

- 1 See relevant data from the World Bank at <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FB.AST.NPER.ZS>>.
- 2 See the special news releases reported by Eurostat at <<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6035076/3-04112014-BP-EN.pdf/62f94e70-e43a-471f-a466-2e84d1029860>>.
- 3 GSEE stands for General Confederation of Workers in Greece. ADEDY stands for Supreme Command of Public Officers' Unions.
- 4 There is no national legal definition of precarious work and in most cases scholars refer to precarious workers as non-standard workers. Nevertheless, prior to the economic crisis, the public debates on the so-called "Precarious Generation" or the "Generation of 700 (or even less in some cases) euros" resulted in a general acknowledgment that a growing and significant portion of the young workforce is trapped in low-paid and insecure jobs. Similar narratives on precarious workers in the media and academic research have referred to the unpleasant set of circumstances that many undocumented migrant workers usually face in Greece. The vicious acid attack on the Bulgarian immigrant union leader Konstantina Kounieva and the massive riots by young people that took place in the streets of Athens in December 2008 could be considered critical events in the conceptualization process of precarious work and its social repercussions in the public debate.
- 5 Since the restoration of democracy (1974) and until lately, the Greek political system was largely bipolar, the two main parties being the social-democratic PASOK and the centre-right New Democracy.
- 6 The violent incidence that took place in the strawberry farms in the area of Manolada is indicative of this condition <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/feedarticle/10752109>>.
- 7 The reference made by K.G. is to the December (2008) Riots, a contentious episode sparked by the killing of Alexis Grigoropoulos, a 15-year-old student, by a police officer.
- 8 SYRIZA (SYnaspismos RIZospastikis Aristeras-Coalition of the Radical Left) is a left-wing political party that gained prominence during the last few years due to its fierce criticism of the austerity measures. SYRIZA won the national election on January 25, 2014 and formed a coalition government with the populist right-wing party ANEL.

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## SUMMARY

### Lost in the Ocean of Deregulation? The Greek Labour Movement in a Time of Crisis.

The 2008 financial crisis had a tremendous impact on the Greek economy and society. Since 2010, widespread popular mobilizations have emerged against the austerity measures that were part of the bail-out package proposed to the Greek governments by the Troika of creditors (EU-ECB-IMF). Yet the institutional trade

unions have failed to impede the reduction of wage earners' income, which, by 2013, had dropped by 50% compared to 2008 levels. These unions have also been largely unable to confirm their leading role in mobilizing the working population. This article examines the reasons for the failure of the institutional trade unions to adequately address the austerity challenge. We consider that the explanation of their shortcomings lies in the generic challenges and problems contemporary trade unions are facing, as documented in the relevant international literature, as well as the specific particularities and traits of the Greek socio-political context. We also investigate the alternatives proposed by militant, grassroots labour organizations, such as neighbourhood-based workers' clubs, industry sector or company-based unions populated by precarious workers, and occupied, self-managed companies. After identifying the strong points of the latter's contributions, as well as the problems and challenges they are facing, we conclude that a diversified and innovative approach is required on the part of the labour movement in order to simultaneously address and exploit all sources of workers' power. The article concludes that a process of strategic rapprochement between mainstream and radical unions in Greece is necessary.

**KEYWORDS:** Trade unions, social unionism, precariousness, grassroots unions, Greece.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Perdu dans un océan de dérèglementation ? Le mouvement ouvrier grec en temps de crise.

La crise financière de 2008 a eu un impact énorme sur l'économie et la société grecques. Depuis 2010, de grandes mobilisations populaires ont émergé contre les mesures d'austérité du plan de sauvetage que la troïka des créanciers (UE-BCE-FMI) a proposé aux gouvernements grecs. Pourtant, les syndicats institutionnels ont échoué à empêcher la réduction des revenus des salariés, à hauteur de 50% en 2013 par rapport à ceux de 2008. En outre, ils furent largement incapables de confirmer leur rôle de leader dans les mobilisations des classes ouvrières et des salariés. Dans cet article, nous examinons les raisons de l'échec des syndicats institutionnels à répondre de manière adéquate au défi de l'austérité. Nous considérons que l'explication de cet échec réside dans les défis et les problèmes génériques auxquels les syndicats contemporains sont confrontés — dont la littérature internationale a documenté le sujet —, ainsi que dans les particularités et les caractéristiques spécifiques du contexte socio-politique grec. Ensuite, nous étudions les alternatives proposées par des groupes de militants et des travailleurs de la base, par exemple, des associations de quartier formées par des travailleurs, des syndicats d'entreprise composés par des travailleurs précaires et des entreprises autogérées en état d'occupation. Après avoir identifié les points forts de leur contribution, ainsi que les problèmes et les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés, nous concluons qu'une approche diversifiée et innovante est requise, au nom du

mouvement ouvrier, afin de simultanément tenir compte et exploiter toute source de pouvoir ouvrier. L'article conclut qu'un processus de rapprochement stratégique entre les syndicats traditionnels et radicaux est nécessaire en Grèce.

MOTS-CLÉS : syndicalisme, mouvements sociaux, précarité, syndicats de base, Grèce.

## RESUMEN

### ¿Perdido en un océano de desreglamentación? El movimiento obrero griego en tiempos de crisis

La crisis financiera de 2008 tuvo un impacto enorme sobre la economía y la sociedad griega. Desde 2010, grandes movilizaciones populares han surgido contra las medidas de austeridad del plan de rescate que la troika de acreedores (Unión Europea, Banco Central de Europa, Fondo Monetario Internacional) ha propuesto a los gobiernos griegos. Sin embargo, los sindicatos institucionales han fracasado a impedir la reducción de los ingresos de asalariados, a la altura del 50% en 2013 respecto los de 2008. Además, ellos fueron completamente incapaces de confirmar su rol de líder en las movilizaciones de clases obreras y de los asalariados. En este artículo, examinamos las razones del fracaso de los sindicatos institucionales a responder de manera adecuada al reto de la austeridad. Consideramos que la explicación de este fracaso se encuentra en los desafíos y problemas genéricos a los cuales los sindicatos contemporáneos son confrontados — como la literatura internacional lo ha documentado —, así como en las particularidades y las características específicas del contexto socio-político griego. Enseguida estudiamos las alternativas propuestas por los grupos de militantes y los trabajadores de base, por ejemplo, de las asociaciones de barrio formadas por trabajadores, sindicatos de empresa compuestos por trabajadores precarios y las empresas de autogestión en estado de ocupación. Después de haber identificado los puntos fuertes de su contribución, así como los problemas y desafíos a los cuales son confrontados, concluimos que se requiere un enfoque diversificado e innovador, en nombre del movimiento obrero, con miras a orientar y explotar toda fuente de poder obrero. El artículo concluye que un proceso de acercamiento estratégico entre los sindicatos tradicionales y radicales es necesario en Grecia.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Sindicalismo, movimientos sociales, precariedad, sindicatos de base, Grecia.