Neoliberal restructuring, trade unions and young workers in **Greece**

Panel 15

Trade unions and precarious workers: any progress?

Lefteris Kretos
University of Greenwich

L.Kretsos@gre.ac.uk
Why Young People do not join Trade Unions?:

1. **Attitudinal Issues** (young people are more antipathetic to trade unions and more individualistic than previous generations)

2. **Structural factors** (characteristics of precarious employment, limited opportunities of non-standards workers to be unionised)

3. **Union specific reasons** (union inefficiencies in terms of recruitment strategies, deficits in internal union democracy, gerontocracy on leadership and the decision making process, unions still struggle with the exclusion/inclusion dilemma of precarious workers)

4. **CEE – ideational legacy**, partially overlapping with (1) (trade unions considered to be an idea stemming from the state socialist past and anti-communist resistance that does not fit into the present, market reality)

5. **Employers abuse the crisis/ Neoliberal Attack**: Neoliberal project long time ago on board, but it was not completed before the outbreak of the crisis!
The History of trade unionism is the history of the fight against precarious work

Only ever been achieved by a small minority of workers: mostly men; mostly in second half of 20th century; mostly in OECD countries

**Class Union**

- **Inclusion versus Exclusion**
- **Equal versus Special Treatment**
- **Precarious Workers Self Organization**

**Social versus Industrial rights**

- **Unitary versus Pluralist model**
- **Political versus Bargaining action**

**Multiculturalist Union Model**

- **Multiculturalist Associative Model**

- **Social versus Industrial rights**
- **Unitary versus Pluralist model**
- **Political versus Bargaining action**

**Equal versus Special Treatment**
BUT is there a real dilemma for Trade Unions today?
Pandemic of Precariousness/ Explosion of Inequality
(TEMS project – University of Greenwich):

**Marketization (IV)**
- changes in transactions.
- more:
  - openness to new players
  - important price mechanism
  - frequent exchange
  - standardization of goods and services

**Mechanisms**
- changes in:
  - firm behavior (exit and extraction)
  - civil society (demobilization)
  - embedding institutions (disorganization)

**Social effects (DV)**
- greater *inequality* in:
  - income
  - security
  - societal influence

*The precariat?*
What is happening in Greece after 2010?
Completion of a Primitive Accumulation process, and Accumulation by dispossession Project

- the commodification and privatization of land and public assets
- the commodification of labour power and the creation of a growing reserve army
- colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of public and private assets (including natural resources);
- the national debt and the credit system in the hands of international rentiers and speculators
Devastating economic performance

Greece. Selected Macroeconomic Variables - 2007=100

Source: OECD
Olympic records in:
- Length/depth of recession,
- Unemployment
- Precarisation of employment
- Rise in Poverty risk
- Social spending cuts
NO BIG SURPRISE:
GROWING ANTI-AUSTERITY MOVEMENT IN GREECE

1. Strikes and Civil Disobedience
2. Legal Activism
3. Reverting to Bartering Economy
4. Greek Indignados/ Occupy Movement (Αγανακτισμένοι)
5. Meteoric Rise of SYRIZA
6. Radical Unionism
So can young precarious workers be organized?  
YES, unsatisfied demand for protection and voice

“conditions for the development of radical alternatives exist where there is little institutional support for trade unions (as in much of the global South), or where the traditional supportive institutional infrastructure is decomposing or withdrawn (as in some parts of the global North)” (Upchurch et al. 2011)
Inertia/ No union organizing and No recruitment or justice campaigns in Greece

- Exemplar case of ‘state corporatism’
- Social democratic consensus and ‘exchange of gifts’ at the expense of a growing precariat
- Trade union factions were ‘colonized’ by strong political parties (clientelistic logics)
- Regulatory anomalies and tough conditions (SEPE, OEE, Iron Law of 21 members)
- mainly bread and butter union claims ignoring ideological aspects of union activity and the needs of certain workforce groups.
- General Strikes malpractice
- Young Workers Committee acting as a cosmetic device
- Trade unions acting as political dinosaurs (Eurobarometer surveys)
Can radical/militant unions be an answer to the unionisation problems of young precarious workers?

- **Strong networks of rank and file activists and self-organized communities**: Militant, grassroots union entities; Informal workers’ collectives; Experimental co-operatives; Self-management projects

- **Strategies**: extension of the agreements’ provisions; campaigns; protests, pickets and blockades; bad employers shorlisting; strike soup kitchen; festivals; social media
Enlarging the playing field of union and social movement praxis

- self-governed hospitals (General Hospital of Kilkis)
- medical community centers (Elliniko, Peristeri etc.)
- occupied factories (Xalivourgiki)
- Factory self-management experiments (VIOME)
- growing networks of part alternative currency/ part barter system markets
- Local communities on the barricades (Keratea, Chalkidiki)
- Blockades of ministries (cleaners’ union) or other state owned premises (ERT workers).
Approaching the unemployed: Workers Centers (Ergatikes Leshes)

“The Workers’ Club wants to become a “city union”, which will complement, not substitute, the working class unionism inside the labour space. At the same time, it shall unite in the struggle the workers and the unemployed in the field of the city”. [Interview with WCNS, 2012] (Kretsos & Vogiatzoglou, forthcoming)
Problems and Challenges

- Rising unemployment, ongoing employers hostility and growing labour law violation symptoms
- Minimal access to labour market regulatory institutions
- Minimal bargaining capacity due to lack of institutional recognition
- The threat(?) of bureaucratization by Syriza
- Too localized and workplace focused (problem of scale of intervention)
Conclusions

• Radical unionism can not be transplanted into a recipe for success (improving the labour market situation of young precarious workers). They should be not be overstated!!!

HOWEVER

• Radical unionism exerts strong pressures to the existing high-level and bureaucratic trade union structures
• Radical political unionism in GR is still an isolated phenomenon, but successful in terms of procedures and strategies, but not in terms of outcomes linked to changing the view of unions (small victories) and not hard outcomes linked to CB agenda
• A failure in constructing unity and synergy between extra-parliamentary and parliamentary struggles will leave the neoliberal hegemony and workers’ suffering unchallenged.

Fighting specific wars in specific ways