

Re-paving the path to hell? Greek trade unions amid crisis and austerity

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1. Introduction

The aim of the present chapter¹ is to provide explanations of the Greek trade unions' limited ability to cope with the austerity challenge, which was imposed on Greece by the Troika and its Memoranda in the aftermath of the bailout of May 2010. In order to understand why the main trade union actors responded to the crisis in the way they did, we shall carry out a path-dependent analysis. More specifically, the trade union choices in terms of both political stances and concrete actions are explained in light of the Greek trade union system and logic that was established in response to important changes in the legislative framework of the early 1990s; namely, the introduction of flexible labour and the approval of Bill 1876/1990 on Free collective bargaining and other provisions (President of the Hellenic Republic 1990). As shall be depicted in the following pages, this legislation – deemed progressive when it was adopted (Danos and Bousli 2014; Ioannou 2011) – had important long-term consequences for the focus and resource allocation of Greek trade unions.

The approach employed here seeks to respond to the question of how the set of decisions trade unions faced during the important transitional points of the period under scrutiny were *limited* by the decisions they had made in the past, even though past circumstances were no longer relevant. And, given the seeming failure of Greek trade unions in dealing with the crisis and austerity of 2010–2015, what conclusions can be drawn with regard to the future of the Greek labour movement? In what ways will their past decisions constrain their future options? It should be clarified that 'predictions', in the literal sense, are too speculative, given the extremely volatile and rapidly changing national context, which was further confused in the aftermath of the change of government in January 2015.

The structure of the Greek trade union confederations is threefold. At the base one finds the primary unions (corporate, productive sector and professional) (Fakiolas 1986). The second level of organisation consists of the labour centres and the productive sector federations (Moschonas 2003). The federations are production

1. Apart from secondary sources, published research and polls, the chapter draws on empirical material gathered during a six-year-long research study of Greek trade unions and labour organisations (2010–2016). The research, which resulted in a PhD thesis and the publication of several peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, included more than 50 interviews with trade union members, leaders and non-unionised workers, as well as extensive field notes taken through participant observation.

branch coalitions of primary unions and the labour centres are locally-oriented, based in the main city of each region (Moschonas 2003). The third organisational level consists of the administration boards, audit committees, general councils and several secretariats of the confederations GSEE and ADEDY. The latter is the public sector employees' confederation, which does not participate directly in collective bargaining and is therefore of secondary importance as regards the purposes of this chapter, while the former is the only Greek trade union confederation participating in collective bargaining procedures and will therefore be at the focus of the present analysis.

GSEE's board is elected at its general assembly, by representatives of the 157 second-level organisations (Zambarloukou 1997). All three levels of the trade union movement structure in Greece are characterised by a relative pluralism; although in general the unions are politicised and closely linked to political parties, the majorities and minorities formed co-exist inside the same organisation. GSEE's decision-making procedures involve some degree of deliberation with the minority factions, but the political strategy of the confederation is ultimately decided on a majoritarian basis.

An important analytical distinction that needs to be made before we present the Greek case study findings is what constitutes a 'trade union'. I usually employ Colin Crouch's inclusive definition, according to which a trade union is 'an organization of employees who have combined together to improve their returns from and conditions at work' (Crouch 1982: 13). However, in what follows, based on its long tradition of involvement in collective bargaining, our references shall be limited mainly to the actions, political line and logic of Greek institutional trade unions, namely the approach taken by the private sector employees' confederation GSEE. This clarification is particularly relevant because since 2000 and – most importantly – during the crisis years, a multitude of grassroots projects, experiments and alternative proposals have emerged (see, for example: Mattoni and Vogiatzoglou 2014; Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou 2015). But, as has been noted by several scholars, the aforementioned projects have not (yet?) managed to alter the big picture of workers' organising in Greece (Kantzara 2014; Kouzis 2014) or to secure better living and working conditions for Greek workers (Karakioulafi *et al.* 2014; Matsaganis 2014).

The chapter is structured as follows. In Section 2, the changes in the economic development model and labour market configurations since 1990 are examined. An analysis of their impact on trade union activity follows in Section 3.1, taking into account indicators such as the unions' organisational, discursive, disruptive and institutional powers. Section 3.2 highlights the impact the crisis and the austerity challenge on Greek labour organisations, highlighting their – perceived here as inadequate – response, as well as the unions' minimal concrete achievements. Section 3.3 examines the current state of the unions' power resources. Finally, Section 4 discusses the aforementioned insights, taking a critical perspective on the Greek trade unions' nostalgic depiction of the pre-crisis period, and suggesting ways forward.

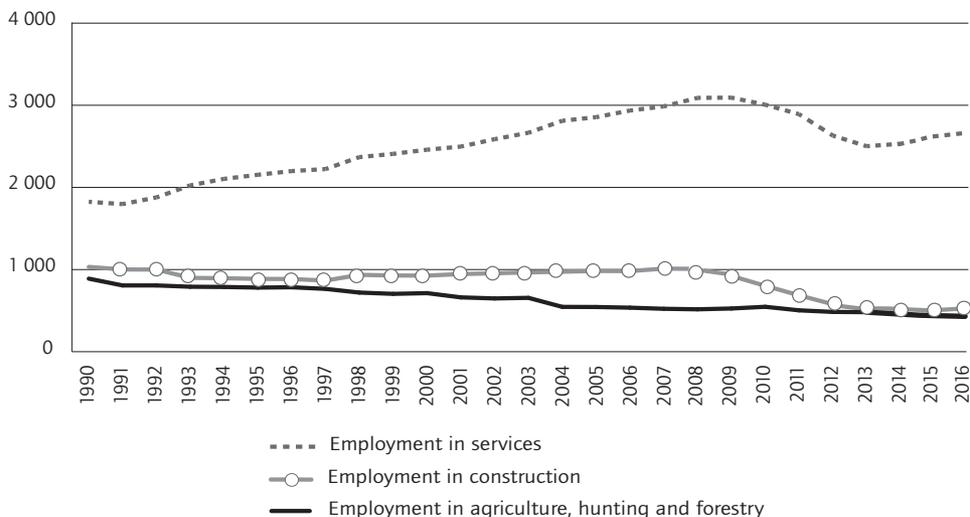
2. Economic and labour market developments until 2010

2.1 The Greek economic development model from 1990 to 2010

It is impossible to understand the labour market reconfigurations that took place from 1990 to 2010 without first examining the country's development model during the same period. Not only were there significant shifts in the main economic policy priorities, but also the foundations of what would become the post-2010 public debt crisis were laid during the years preceding the Lehman Brothers collapse. First, with respect to the political scenery, the new decade (1990s) found Greece with a right-left coalition in government. It was then that the 'Free collective bargaining' bill was passed unanimously in the Greek parliament. From 1990 to 1993, a right-wing government ruled, whose ambitious neoliberal reform agenda was undermined by strong labour resistance and dwindling popular support. The snap elections of 1993 brought Andreas Papandreou's social democratic party back to power. However, PASOK quickly distanced itself from its populist past (Lyberaki and Tsakalotos 2002). Papandreou's successors followed, broadly speaking, European social democrats' social-liberal turn (Tsakalotos 1998). PASOK stayed in government until 2004.

Its economic policy focus revolved mainly around three axes that are important to this chapter. First, a focus on the service sector: tourism, telecommunications and banking spearheaded the increase in the sector's contribution to Greek GDP, rising from around 70 per cent in 1990 to over 80 per cent in 2014 (see also: Palaiologos and Kassar 2003; Michaelides *et al.* 2013). Employment in the production sector was influenced by this shift. Figure 1 presents the changes in workforce composition.

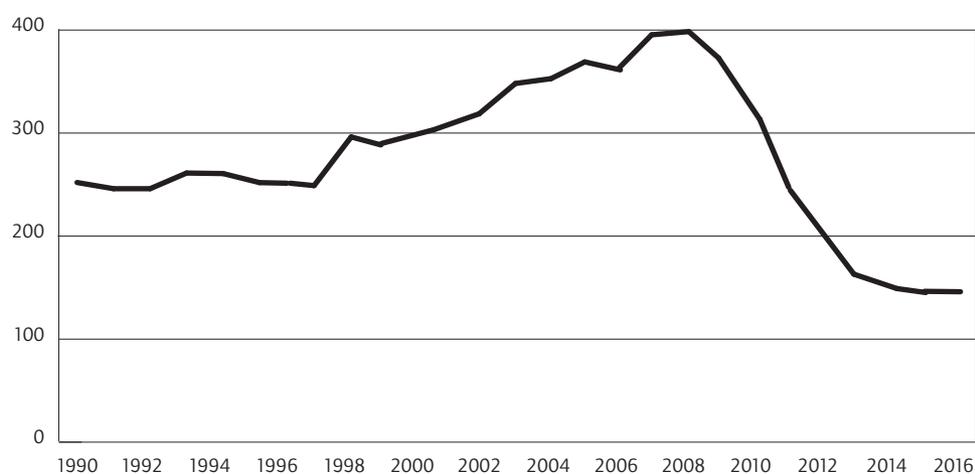
Figure 1 **Employment by sector of production ('000)**



Source: OECD 2018.

Second, there was a focus on major infrastructure construction, which was boosted by the country's need to prepare for the Olympic Games, from 1996 to 2004. The mechanism chosen to fund the relevant mega-projects was public-private sector joint ventures, occasionally co-funded by the EU and/or state borrowing (Kasimati and Dawson 2009; Kasimati 2003). Small-scale construction was also boosted through cheap housing loans and mortgages offered by an ever-expanding banking sector. The number of construction workers reached a peak of about 400,000 in 2008, prior to collapsing to less than 100,000 in 2014 (Figure 2). (It should be noted that the OECD data presented here are based on official registers and thus do not include the large number of undocumented, mostly central and eastern European migrants who massively entered the labour market after 1991.

Figure 2 **Employees in construction ('000)**



Source: OECD 2018.

Third, ever since the mid-1990s, a combination of mild austerity and careful monetary policies aimed at drastically reducing inflation were implemented, in order to enable Greece to become a member of the euro zone (Oltheten *et al.* 2013).

Indeed, Greece not only managed to reduce its inflation rate from 24 per cent in 1991 to below 5 per cent in 2001 – the year it adopted the euro – but it constantly outperformed euro-zone average economic growth from 1996 to 2007.

These impressive achievements, however, took a heavy toll on the country's long-term economic prospects. The notably high GDP increases during the period under scrutiny relied on external borrowing. The public debt-to-GDP ratio was below 80 per cent, but broke through the 100 per cent threshold in 1993 and exploded after 2008, reaching an all-time high of 180.5 per cent in 2014 (Trading Economics 2015).

As the GSEE labour institute summarised developments in an article published in its monthly review *Enimerosi*,

‘especially since the early 1990s, the aforementioned mix of development and economic policy led to the gradual technological, innovative, organizational and qualitative devaluation of the productive infrastructure and agriculture, fostering instead tourism, construction and maritime business, [favouring] unskilled labour over skilled labour, and abandoning the production of high-quality and surplus-value goods that would be able to penetrate dynamically and hold a steady presence in international markets.’ (INE-GSEE 2011: 3)

2.2 Structural changes in the labour market

When it comes to labour relations, 1990 was an important threshold as two different legislative initiatives laid the foundations for radical shifts in the labour market structure. The first was the Free collective bargaining bill, mentioned in the Introduction. Perhaps for the first time, a serious effort was made by the state to construct tripartite social dialogue bodies. The bill allowed the agenda of collective bargaining to include issues beyond mere wage discussions and instituted mechanisms of arbitration and collective dispute resolution (Stamati 2013; Ioannou 2000; Zambarloukou 2006). The trade unions hailed the reform and rushed to get involved in the collective bargaining structure, as they correctly perceived the potential for short-term individual and collective benefits for the union leadership and their organisations. As Culpepper and Regan put it, participation in collective deliberation procedures were a ‘carrot’ trade unions could use to retain their institutional power, as it was accompanied by the promise of a certain degree of labour peace that the trade union leadership could guarantee to their social partners, employers and the state (Culpepper and Regan 2014).

Second, labour market flexibilisation was also introduced in 1990, the year when part-time employment became officially recognised as part of the labour relations’ system. Following the broader mainstream approach of ‘flexibilisation’, as adopted in many other countries, up to 2009 at least eight legislative packages passed in the Greek parliament made reference to flexible labour, deregulated certain aspects of the labour market and/or re-regulated others in accordance with international standards (Milo 2009; Stamati 2013). The last such initiative that took place prior to the 2010 bailout agreement between the Greek government and its creditors included various regulations on temporary agency workers and a new configuration of the status of human resource management companies (Vogiatzoglou 2010). The flexibilisation of the labour market in Greece had as an explicit aim the introduction of employment contract types that were not previously available and left untouched the working conditions of open-ended contract workers. Therefore, the main fields of contention which emerged were not so much focused on contract termination regulations, but rather questions of wages, access to welfare provisions and specific workers’ rights embedded in contracts (holiday, maternity leave, payment of contributions to the social welfare system and so on).

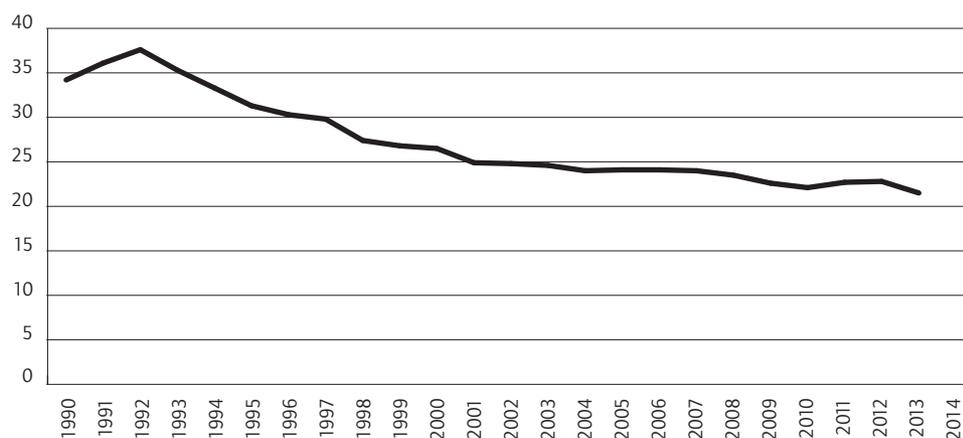
Union responses to flexibilisation were weak. Apart from a few angry press releases, the Greek trade unions made scarce use of their research institute’s publications and findings, which consistently highlighted the risks that workers and their organisations alike would face in a deregulated and flexibilised labour market (see, for example, Georgakopoulou and Kouzis 1995; INE-GSEE 2009).

3. The carrot and the stick: labour market reconfigurations and their impact on trade unions

3.1 Greek trade union power resources

With respect to the unions' *organisational* power, the main indicator to be examined is union density. The available data paint a grim picture when it comes to the near past, present and future of the Greek labour movement. Although there are scholarly disputes concerning the proper way to calculate union density in Greece (for an overview, see Vogiatzoglou 2014), the OECD statistics reveal an undisputable declining tendency, similar to the one experienced across the Western hemisphere during the same period (Figure 3). What is more, trade unions failed to find ways to mobilise the large numbers of undocumented migrant workers, as well as the ever-expanding precarious labour force which clustered around various service sector professions (telecommunications, call centres, engineering, catering and cleaning services). As shall be examined below, the unionising initiatives of precarious employees were mainly by grassroots activists (Kretsos 2011), while migrant workers remain largely unorganised. It is noteworthy that GSEE has invested no resources in organising. It does not employ professional organisers, nor has it launched any unionising campaigns (Kretsos 2011: 461).

Figure 3 Union density (%)



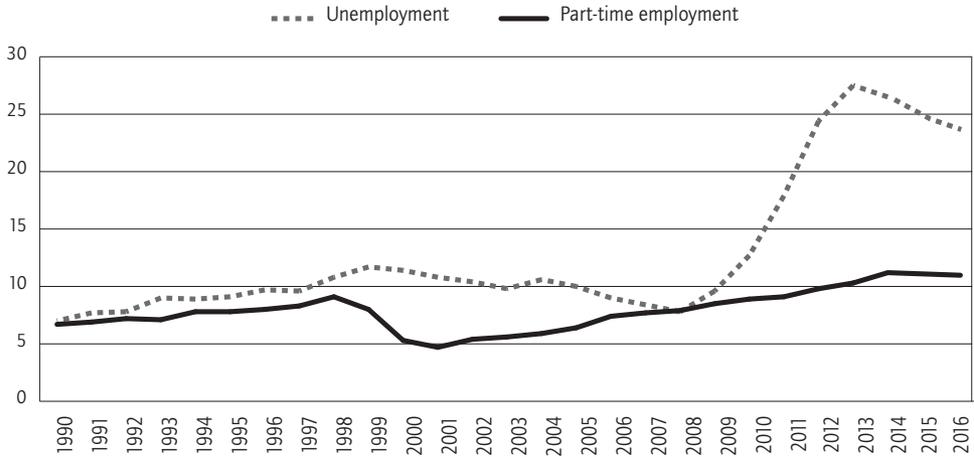
Source: OECD 2018.

These elements also offer some insight into why loss of organisational power was accompanied by a similar trend in the Greek trade unions' *structural* power. During the 1970s and 1980s, Greek trade unions had established a solid membership base in public services, public utility companies (water, electricity, telecommunications), municipality and regional employees, as well as specific industrial sectors where workers voted en masse for the Communist Party (docks, construction, shipyards, among others).

After 1990, unemployment remained fairly stable somewhat above the EU average (Figure 4). What is more, the incidence of part-time employment followed the overall

employment trends, its rate turning negative at around the turn of the century, when employment demand was high.

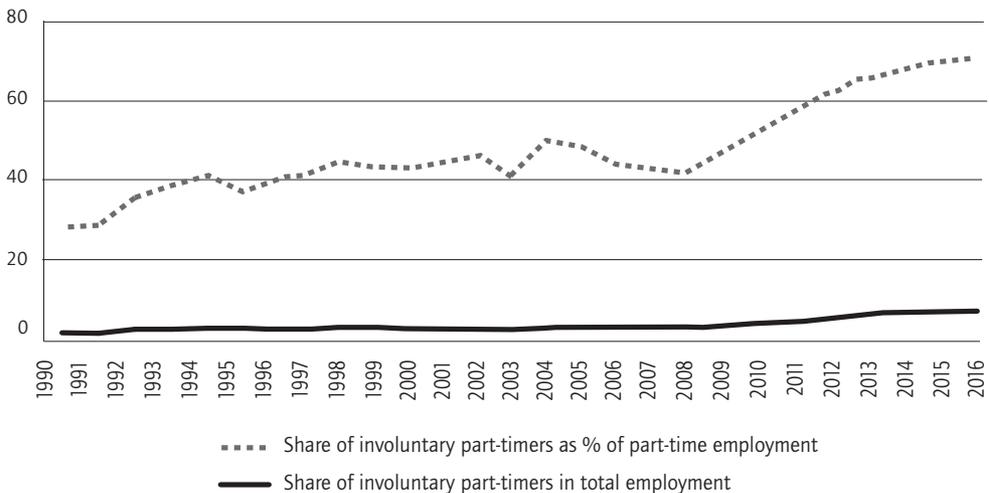
Figure 4 **Unemployment (%) and part-time employment (% of total employment)**



Source: OECD 2018.

However, it is important to note that the share of involuntary part-timers in the workforce (Figure 5) was constantly on the rise, as a percentage of both part-time employment and total employment. The loss of jobs in sectors characterised by relatively high unionisation was balanced by an increase in services jobs, which traditionally have low unionisation (Zambarloukou 1997; Kouzis 2007).

Figure 5 **Involuntary part-time employees**



Source: OECD 2018.

The emergence of private competitors in previously state-dominated sectors (telecommunications, banking) further aggravated the situation, as the difference between private and public sector unionisation levels is dramatic. As a 2010 EIRO report notes, in ‘the public sector enterprises and public utilities and services [union density] ranges from 80 to 98 per cent. In the private it is very low, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises’ (EIRO 2011). The new professions that emerged during the expansion of information technology were also non-unionised, with the exception of telecommunications’ companies and call-centres, where since 2000 grassroots efforts have been made to organise enterprise- and sector-level unions (Zamponi and Vogiatzoglou 2015). However, as these initiatives were led mainly by radical activists with previous political experience (and a deep mistrust of union leadership), relations between the newly-founded entities and the official trade union leadership remained tense during the whole period under scrutiny (Vogiatzoglou 2011). In sum, the period until 2010 was characterised by a weakening of the position of employment groups based in well-organised professions and sectors, while expanding professional and production categories were scarcely unionised.

When it comes to unions’ institutional integration, as was noted in Section 2.2, the legislative interventions of 1990 allowed for a dramatic increase in the Greek labour movement’s *institutional* power. Up until 2012, the collective bargaining system in Greece was characterised by three elements: obligatory extension of collective agreements to all workers, unionised or not; mediation in case of industrial disputes by a tripartite body (OMED, see below) in which the state representatives could determine majority decisions; and the obligatory prolongation of collective agreements even after their expiry, should no new agreement be signed (Zambarloukou 2006).

Collective bargaining would take place at several levels. GSEE would negotiate and sign the national collective agreement with the respective national employers’ associations. Professional, local and production sector unions would sign agreements with their respective employers’ associations. Enterprise-level unions could sign collective agreements directly with their employers. In all these cases, the workers’ personal contracts had to abide by the most positive – for workers’ rights – collective agreement, regardless of whether the workers themselves were unionised or not. If a collective agreement expired and the two parties were unwilling, or unable, to sign a new one, either party could unilaterally request the intervention of OMED (Organisation of Mediation and Refereeing), whose decisions were legally binding. What is more, the expired collective agreement retained its validity for another six months, allowing the parties to successfully complete their negotiations.

According to several scholars, however, this particularly positive institutional framework further aggravated the pre-existing trade union structural and organisational problems. As Seferiadis notes, during the 1990s the Greek trade unions rushed to adopt the ‘co-operative model of industrial relations. Against the background of a weak and retrenching welfare state, however, this led to concession bargaining which, instead of improving, has further worsened the problem of declining union credibility and density’ (Seferiades 1999: 3).

Furthermore, during the whole period under scrutiny, the links between political parties and trade union leadership remained very strong. Trade union fractions had clear political affiliations and their representatives were elected on a quasi-political ticket. All three former presidents of GSEE since 1990 moved on to become MPs, ministers or high-profile members of the PASOK central committee and governments after their mandate expired. Several other high-ranking trade unionists, associated with the right-wing New Democracy, the Communist Party KKE or the left-wing Synaspismos (later SYRIZA), followed a similar trajectory. Admittedly, the privileged interpersonal relations of trade union and party officials led to an increased influence of the Greek trade unions on the central political scene. However, this scheme also worked the other way round. Scholars acknowledge that one of the main structural problems of the Greek trade union system is so-called ‘governmental trade unionism’, in which the top layers of the union hierarchy actively engage in efforts to pacify grassroots mobilisation in order to maintain their privileged relations with their political affiliates and promote the policy priorities of the latter (Ioannou 2000; Kritsantonis 1992; Ioannou 1989).²

The above elements combined explain, to a certain extent, the relative scarcity of significant worker mobilisations from 1993 to 2010. Dependent on their political party of origin, amidst a declining union density, loss of structural power and lack of young, visionary leaders, the Greek trade union leadership focused on exploiting the positive collective bargaining framework and proved unable to maintain their capacity for long-lasting, cross-sectoral industrial action of the kind that had characterised the labour landscape of the late 1970s, early 1980s, and 1990–1993 (Aytonomi Protouvoulia Politon 1983). The close links between the political system and trade unions, however, enabled the political strike par excellence, the 24-hour general strike, to become the main ‘stick’ in the hand of the Greek trade unions until 2010. During all these years, at least one general strike per year was proclaimed, on the day the state budget was voted on. Participation in the strikes was not particularly impressive, but the size of the demonstrations was an indicator of social discontent, occasionally totally irrelevant to the official labour demands.

Of course, noteworthy exceptions to this general labour peace were to be found, such as the 2001 protests against planned pension reform, which forced the government to withdraw it; the teachers’ strike in 1998; and several other multi-day strikes of bank employees, municipality workers and university faculty. However, throughout the period most mobilisations were spearheaded by other social groups: high-school and university students (1998–1999 and 2006–2007), young people (2008) and alter-globalisation activists (1999–2003).

Finally, the Greek trade unions’ *discursive* power remained limited. The Eurobarometer data of 1999 and 2008 show that, in both time-frames, more than 70 per cent of the

2. An interesting exception to this general rule came after the crisis, with the inability of SYRIZA to control the trade unions in the GSEE board elections of 2013 and 2016, despite the general election demise of its main competitor, the social democrat PASOK. The explanation lies partly in SYRIZA’s weak social base; the GSEE electoral system, in which representatives to its national congress, where the board is elected, may be chosen up to four years before the congress itself, which means that sudden political scenery shifts are not well represented (Vogiatzoglou 2014b); and the collapse of the clientelist state–party–citizen relations (Lyrintzis 1984), which in the past had been a driving force of ‘governmental trade unionism’.

population had little or no confidence in trade unions (European Commission 1999; European Commission 2008). This score is similar to many other European countries, but a further weakening of the Greek trade unions' public perception was noted during the crisis, as the term 'trade union' itself conjured a negative image to 62 per cent of Eurobarometer respondents in autumn 2014 (European Commission 2014), and 69 per cent of respondents in spring 2016 (European Commission 2016) (note that the respective percentage was only 33 per cent in the autumn 2009 Eurobarometer). As the crisis years persisted, hostility against the GSEE leadership was also expressed through street politics. GSEE's current president, Yannis Panagopoulos, was physically assaulted by angry mobs twice during strike demonstrations. The GSEE headquarters were occupied for several days on three different occasions (2009, 2011 and 2014). The grassroots activists who occupied the building accused the confederation of complacency and an unwillingness to represent the workers' interests.

In sum, all the elements that explain the failure of the Greek trade unions to cope with the crisis and austerity challenge were already present in 2010. First, a set of deep structural problems: declining union density; the inability to reach out to young and migrant workers; and a fragmented mid-level organisational structure, hampering cross-sectoral coordination. Second, a predictable, single-weapon (the general strike) industrial action arsenal. Years of resource allocation solely to collective bargaining had caused a loss of know-how and of the ability to coordinate a long-lasting mobilisation. Finally, there was a severe leadership problem. The trade union leadership was regarded as discredited by large swaths of the employees. An outdated electoral system favoured incumbents over newcomers, placing obstacles to leadership renewal. Last but not least, the majority of GSEE and ADEDY board members had close ties to a party (PASOK) that was about to be wiped off the electoral map.

3.2 Trade unions during the crisis

Simplifying, one can summarise Greece's economic policies in the course of the crisis in just two terms: *austerity* and *internal devaluation*. When, in April 2010, the Greek Social Democrat government announced the so-called Memorandum of Understanding signed by itself and the Troika of creditors (ECB – EU – IMF), it became immediately evident that the austerity measures the deal called for would first and foremost target the working population. The memorandum brought about mass unemployment, wage and pension cuts, tax hikes and, most importantly, the collapse of the collective bargaining system that had been adopted in 1990 (Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016). The impact on the unions was twofold, both direct and indirect. The indirect consequence is related to the rapid rise in unemployment and the maximum resource mobilisation on behalf of the political and economic elites in order to counter potential reactions. The fear of unemployment provided counter-incentives to the workers at the expense of mobilising and engaging in labour action, while a series of defeats in small- and medium-scale disputes made it clear to everyone that isolated, company- or productive sector-level struggles had no chance of success. The direct consequence was that the collective bargaining system inherited from the previous period was totally dismantled, as the creditors demanded. At the national level, the collective agreement signed by GSEE

was cancelled and the minimum monthly wage was reduced by legislative decree to some 540 euros gross (slashed from 751 euros per month, as laid down in the national collective agreement). At the sectoral and occupational levels, the state arbitration and mediation mechanisms were abandoned. The obligatory time extension of collective agreements after their expiry, if no new agreement was signed, was abolished. And employers were no longer bound by collective agreements signed by their respective employers' association. Today, only a handful of sectoral or professional collective agreements are in force. The majority of employees are covered only by the minimum wage, as defined by the state decree mentioned above. What is more, the expansion of precarious, undeclared and part-time labour further contributed to the reduction of workers' incomes. As the GSEE's Labour Institute notes, as of 2015 '34.7 per cent of full-time workers and 42.13 per cent of part-time workers receive a salary that is lower than the national minimum wage' (INE-GSEE 2017: 7).

The unions therefore lost both their carrot and (part of) their stick. The only leverage left to them was top-level political interventions. Given the lack of alternatives in their industrial action arsenal, it is no surprise that the 24-hour general strike tool was massively employed.

The first general strike against austerity was called on 5 May 2010. Protest and strike participation was exceptionally high – some 250,000 people participated in the Athens protest (Kousis 2012) – and the demonstrators turned up at the parliament, where they were confronted by riot police. Several general strikes were called in 2010, but participation was rather weak – at least compared with what would follow. Protest activity resumed towards the end of 2010 and intensified during the winter of 2010–2011.

In 2011 and 2012, more than 30 days of general strike were proclaimed. The symbolic weight of these strikes was most important in the development of the anti-austerity movement. Research has confirmed that all the major protest events occurred exactly on the days when general strikes were called (Kousis and Kanellopoulos 2013; Kousis 2012; Diani and Kousis 2014). On strike days, tens of thousands (occasionally, hundreds of thousands) of protesters would march in the streets of Athens and the other major Greek cities and clashes with the police and other violent action were frequent. General strikes were complemented by widespread discontent expressed by various social groups, mostly through acts of civil disobedience: refusal to pay newly imposed taxes, verbal and physical attacks on politicians in public spaces and protests in previously non-politicised settings and at events, such as football stadiums and military and school parades (Insider 2012; Karatziou 2012; to vima 2011).

In 2013, two major production sector strikes took place, involving metro workers and secondary school teachers. The lack of coordination with other professional and productive sector organisations proved fatal, as both were met with extreme state repression: apart from the 'civil conscription' of strikers,³ riot police intervened to clear

3. 'Civil conscription' was a legislative provision allowing the government to break a strike on the grounds of 'public safety' by forcing strikers to carry on working on pain of imprisonment. The provision was cancelled in April 2015 by the SYRIZA government.

the respective workplaces of strikers and workers standing in solidarity with them. In June 2013, the announcement of the closure of the public TV/radio broadcaster (ERT) and the sacking of its employees was met with a spontaneous demonstration by some 50,000 people outside the company's headquarters. ERT studios were occupied all over Greece, and the TV and radio stations continued broadcasting clandestinely, until the point when, once again, the riot police intervened to re-occupy them.

The concrete achievements of these actions were minimal: facing an opponent who had mobilised all resources available, was basing its actions on a very clear political strategy and was assisted by a strong propaganda mechanism launched by practically all major private media outlets, the unions failed to block any of the proposed measures. They did contribute, however, alongside the broad array of organisations and political groupings that constituted the Greek anti-austerity movement, to the collapse of Greece's post-dictatorship political party system. In 2011, the last PASOK government resigned. The technocrat government that replaced it lasted less than a year. It took two rounds of national elections, in May and June 2012, for a tripartite coalition government to be formed. In May 2014, the left-wing party SYRIZA won the Euro-elections; the government staggered on for a few more months, and new snap elections were called for January 2015. SYRIZA won and formed a coalition government with right-wing populist splinter party ANEL.

The first six months of SYRIZA in power were relatively calm as regards labour mobilisation. The government enjoyed unprecedented popularity and its negotiations with the creditors monopolised the social and political agenda, leaving no space for major changes in the labour relations' framework. During the feverish summer of 2015, though, negotiations reached deadlock. The Greek banks were experiencing enormous deposit flows abroad and the state treasury had reached the point at which it was unable to carry out even its most fundamental financial obligations. Capital controls were imposed and a referendum was called to decide on a new memorandum.

GSEE, which had remained largely on the sidelines for months, issued a statement calling on its members to *approve* the new bailout agreement by voting 'YES to our common currency and federal Europe'.⁴ The outcome – 61.3 per cent voted 'No' – highlighted the extent to which union leadership had become alienated from their base. Although no systematic research has been conducted on the referendum vote, a simple observation of regional results confirms that workers, especially the poorer ones, totally defied the trade union's suggestion, and rejected the proposed agreement by a landslide.

What followed was the capitulation of Alexis Tsipras to the creditors' demands, snap elections, re-election of a subdued SYRIZA and the adoption, by the formerly radical left-wing party, of yet another round of austerity measures. The trade unions called for a couple of general strikes against the new memorandum, but participation was minimal, due to the widespread disillusionment and despair. At the time of writing, the Greek

4. GSEE Press Release, unnumbered, 01/07/2015. Available at: <http://www.gsee.gr/2015/07/01/deltio-tipou-sinedriasi-olomelias-diikisis-gsee-3/>

government is still negotiating with the creditors, on potential changes in the labour legislation framework. SYRIZA is requesting the reinstatement of collective agreements, while the Troika is demanding the facilitation of mass lay-offs, the introduction of lock-outs – abolished in Greece in 1982 – and a set of legislative initiatives that would render more difficult the proclamation of company and production sector strikes.

3.3 Persisting problems in an ongoing crisis

In Section 3.1, three main categories of challenges that the Greek trade unions were facing in 2010 were identified. In 2016, the structural problems remain intact, amidst a much harsher environment. Trade unions' organisational and structural powers have been weakened, due to the dramatic rise in unemployment. Employers no longer need trade unions to secure labour peace: mass unemployment works as a counter-incentive towards both unionisation and mobilisation to secure labour rights. The unions' institutional power is almost destroyed, as the pre-crisis collective bargaining framework has been dismantled. In terms of leadership, no significant changes have been noted since 2010. The current GSEE board was elected in March 2016. Panagopoulos' mandate was renewed for another four years. Table 1 shows the current composition of the GSEE executive.

Table 1 **GSEE executive**

Name	Affiliation	Votes	Seats
PASKE	PASOK (Social Democrat)	119	15
DAS	KKE (Communist)	83	10
DAKE	New Democracy (right-wing)	67	8
EAK	Left-wing	53	7
Nea DAKE	Right-wing	31	4
EMEIS	Extreme-left	9	1
TEK	Extreme-left	6	0

Source: GSEE Press release, March 20, 2016.

Yannis Panagopoulos's PASKE (affiliated with PASOK) holds 15 seats. A split of the right-wing union fractions weakened them, but they did manage to secure a total of 12 seats. The Communist Party fraction has been strengthened, coming second and electing a total of 10 representatives. Leftist union fraction EAK is represented by seven trade unionists. Nea DAKE is a split from New Democracy affiliate DAKE. EMEIS was a split from PASOK-affiliated PASKE, but many in its ranks allied with the extra-parliamentary leftist party Popular Alliance (Laiki Enotita), which is composed of former SYRIZA officials, MPs and Ministers who disagreed with the pro-Troika turn of their party. Finally, TEK is largely supported by ANTARSYA, an extra-parliamentary extreme-left party. It is noteworthy that the governing party, SYRIZA, has no affiliates among the trade union leadership. The reason is that the union fraction that was affiliated with Alexis Tsipras' party (Aftonomi Paremvasi – AP) dissolved in the aftermath of the Greek government's capitulation. Several trade unionists resigned, while the rest moved on to

form new coalitions. It is important to note that the splits, realignments and affiliation shifts depicted above do not signify a weakening of party–trade union relations in Greece, but rather reflect the volatility of the political party system over the past few years.

4. Conclusions

In this concluding section, what needs to be discussed are the prospects of the Greek labour movement, more specifically its agenda and the means employed to achieve its demands and goals. We have examined the inadequacy of the traditional Greek industrial action toolkit. For Greek workers, the 24-hour general strike has more of a symbolic than a practical usefulness. Indeed, it was noted that even in times of relative labour peace, it was common to encounter two or three general strikes per year. The quantitative change during the crisis years was deemed insufficient and indicative of the GSEE's inability to renew its repertoire. On the other hand, the alternative proposed by many radical grassroots unions, an *open-ended* nationwide general strike, was impossible, not only because of the unwillingness of the trade union leadership to engage in 'the mother of all battles', but also because the trade union movement did not have the organisational capacities to sustain such a resource-intensive mobilisation. Apart from the low union density, the Greek unions lacked the experience of major labour struggles. The last recorded long-lasting, multi-sector labour actions took place in the 1980s and early 1990s (Ioannou 2000; Koukoules and Tzanetakos 1986), a period when the unions were much stronger than today and the socio-political context was totally different. Since then, macro-level union activity has been confined to representing the workers in the so-called 'social dialogue' structures (Daskalakis 1995). The occasional conflicts that broke out seldom went beyond the symbolic level. Furthermore, society itself became very hostile towards the union leadership, thus discouraging mobilisation that would require high levels of social support.

To cut a long story short, what the leaders of GSEE failed to perceive in 2010 and onwards was that, in the radically changed socio-political context of the crisis years, a qualitative rather than quantitative shift of industrial action repertoire, renewal of organisational practices and structures, as well as a strengthening of the membership base were required.

The – already grim – prospects of the Greek labour movement are further overshadowed by the lack of any innovative proposals and demands in the trade unions' agenda. Six years after the unfolding of the crisis, their agenda is monopolised by a nostalgia with regard to the pre-crisis period: the only issues raised are a minimum wage increase to the pre-crisis level and the re-establishment of the 2009 collective bargaining framework. There can be no doubt about the crucial importance of a re-establishment of the collective bargaining system, but it will not be sufficient to restore the trade unions' capacity to act and to propel the trade unions out of their awkward situation. It is noteworthy that this lack of productive ideas is not limited to the (more moderate) majority of the Confederation leadership, but also reflects the viewpoints of the leftist forces in the union system, those who were previously affiliated with SYRIZA, as well as the extreme-left fractions.

Undoubtedly, this trade union ‘romanticism’ is to some extent understandable. Hardly anyone could argue against a more regulated labour market – especially upon observing the contemporary ‘job-jungle’ of labour relations in Greece – or higher wages for a labour force that has been deprived of some 30 per cent of its median income during the past six years (European Commission 2015b; Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015). However, one problem that cannot be overlooked is that the trade union agenda calls for a return to a period when – as argued above – all the structural, collective action repertoire and leadership issues were already present. How could one assume that *this time* the outcome could be significantly different?

During the crisis years, a series of proposals addressing the long-lasting, systemic trade union challenges were raised by labour scholars. Federation mergers were suggested as a remedy to mid-level organisations’ fragmentation and coordination deficit (Kapsalis 2013). Undertaking ‘specialised and measurable programmes to recruit new members in trade unions, putting the emphasis on new wage labour strata (young, female, flexible workers, migrants, new dynamic professional sectors)’ (Kouzis 2014: 16) was proposed to counter declining trade union density. Progressive changes in the GSEE–ADEDY electoral systems could open a path for medium-term trade union leadership renewal. A focus on establishing links with non-labour related social movement organisations and anti-austerity activists was also suggested (Vogiatzoglou 2013). Finally, many scholars have emphasised the need for better cross-national cooperation and collaboration between trade unions, in Europe and beyond (Bieler *et al.* 2015; Bieler and Erne 2014; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2015; Kouzis 2014). These discussions are interesting, but their usefulness could prove to be limited, insofar as they are confined to the scholarly level. It remains to be seen whether trade union activists will grasp the opportunity to commence a sincere, in-depth assessment of the past, present and future of the Greek labour movement. If they do not, even if their organisations succeed in restoring a – supposedly glorious – *ancien regime* (a development which seems highly unlikely at this moment), what the Greek trade unions might achieve is merely to re-pave the path to neoliberal hell.

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