

## **Analyzing the Relevance of Gender and Class in the Case of the Greek Trade Union Movement**

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### ***Introduction***

The paper attempts to contribute to the Global Labor debate by referring specifically to the Greek Labor movement (lm). The aim of the paper is to analyze the impact of new approaches to Labor history<sup>1</sup> on the bibliography for the Greek lm. The Greek lm was said to be weak due to Greece's industrial underdevelopment. Also it has been argued, that on a political level clientelistic relations have marred Greek working people's opportunity to establish a trade union movement composed of massive horizontal organizations<sup>2</sup>. The question of class organization is relevant here.

### **Labor and Industry in Greece**

In Greece it is difficult to construe the Labor movement as a class movement for two reasons: industry grew in small and fragmented enclaves<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, Greek political parties managed to control the establishment of all forms of social movements and therefore the possibility for an autonomous labor movement disappeared. Yet if we take the new approaches of labor history seriously we have to accept that the conditions of work in Greece have similarities with other late industrialized social formations. In other words, exploitation - if this is understood in terms of a Marxist notion of bad working conditions - has certainly appeared in Greece as well. The labor movement is not only demonstrations and strikes, but is also working class cultural institutions and organisations providing social welfare for working people. As E.P. Thompson (1962) wrote, it is up to working people to express their class solidarity in ways that please them<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These approaches to Labor are presented extensively in Lex Heerma van Voss and Marcel van der Linden (eds) (2002) *Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the writing of European Labor History*. New York: Berghahn.

<sup>2</sup> The individualistic reasons which have determined a person's engagement in politics in Greece affected people's attitude to the utility of trade unions as well. As Konstantinos Tsoukalas (1977, pp.101-2) has pointed out, the Greek people's great preoccupation with politics and public debate has never reflected a genuine concern for political debate. On the contrary, it has been motivated by the desire to preserve a comfortable life for themselves and their families. This was certainly true for the period immediately after the formation of the Greek state in 1830. This continued to be the case for much longer, and has not altogether disappeared even now. Other writers have described this individualistic motivation for political engagement in Greece as conducive to the heteronomous and vertical way in which the Greek people were incorporated in politics (Nicos Mouzelis, 1986, p.74). It has also contributed, of course, to the Greek state's success in controlling the associations of civil society. Furthermore, as Mouzelis (1986) has argued, it is an essential feature of the polity of societies wherein parliamentary institutions were established before developing an effective industry. In other words, the state is able to assume control of civil society if the latter is weak, mainly because civil society does not include a sizeable, organized working-class element.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Mouzelis (1978) *Modern Greece: Facets of Underdevelopment*.

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Thompson (1962) *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin. Thompson has specifically written: "If we stop history at a given point, there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition" Thompson: 1962: 10).

In order to underline the consequences of clientelistic relations on the ability of Greek working people to set up an autonomous trade union movement Mouzelis (1986) argued that working class masses were integrated in Greek politics not in a horizontal and class determined way but in a vertical clientelistic one. Moreover, those working people who manage to create politically influential trade unions are privileged groups of working people<sup>5</sup>. As George Koukoules has written what initially appears as representative of Greek labor may be better understood as simulacra or as a group of people whose main concern is to promote their own interests and not the interests of the people whom they supposedly represent<sup>6</sup>. In Greece's case what appears as a trade union movement is in reality an extensive network of clientelistic relations which after 1981 was transformed to a populist movement supporting the socialist government of Andreas Papandreou. This movement constituted the backbone of the socialist party in the public sector wherein labor activism was incorporated in a trade union movement affiliated to the Socialist government. Furthermore, the cadres in organized labor were incorporated to the political system materialized in all groups affiliated with the Greek political parties. This form of unionism could only develop in the public sector whilst the private sector remained almost completely uninfluenced by organized labor. Hence the majority of Greek working people who worked in the private sector remained ununionized, paradoxically helping the dissociation of the Greek trade union movement into two poles: a heavily unionized public sector manipulated by the political party system and a private sector wherein unionism of rank and file is almost entirely absent. What is interesting in this case is the fact that the differentiation of working people between an intensively unionized sector and a sector outside organized Labor's influence was not a question of class dynamics. Both blue and white collar workers could be equally unionized provided they were employed in the public sector.

Furthermore, since the end of seventies Greek industry lost a great amount of black collar workers who in the previous years had made a significant contribution to the industrial workers' movement. In the next decade the socialist government recognized trade union rights and favoured the position of trade unions in industrial relations. In the nineties the General Confederation of Greek labor created their own research centre, named the Institute of Labor, and was particularly preoccupied with their own research into the conditions of Greek labor, published in two periodicals edited by the Institute. In addition, a new journal focusing on trade unions and industrial relations was published whilst the Greek state set up its own research institute looking at industrial relations in the state sector, taking into account both the positions of employers and employees. All these facts helped to promote an interest in labor issues amongst Greek social scientists, where the emphasis was more on industrial relations and arbitration and less on the working class as an issue for research analysis with few exceptions.

Moreover, I think that both political parties and political scientists have written about the Greek Labor movement as if it never existed. In Antonis Liakos' work the main protagonist responsible for establishing labor organizations is not the labor movement itself but the Venizelos government<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> For Mavrogordatos, the trade unions' failure to represent working class interests is related to the proletariat's failure to organize itself. This failure is symptomatic of the clientelistic networks through which Greek people have been incorporated into politics in an heteronomous way. Even the language employed to talk about workers demonstrates that the industrial proletariat and its concerns were not an issue in the organization of civil society in Greece. The concept of 'the productive classes' was applied to petty-bourgeois shopkeepers and artisans, and to middle and upper-class businessmen, but never to laborers or any other types of employees. Moreover, the 'productive classes', occasionally called 'likeable' or 'sympathetic' (in Greek *sympatheis*), as for instance in the phrase 'the likeable class of the taxi-drivers and bakers', could go on strike and put forward economic demands in a similar way to that of the workers' organizations. Some of them were also legitimate members of the higher labor organization, the General Confederation of the Greek labor (*op.cit.*, p.30).

<sup>6</sup> As Koukoules has specifically written: "our social history is a history of very intense class confrontations which - due to the working people's defeat - resulted in the dissolution and the replacement of the institutions of civil society with simulacra. These frontage institutions had a dual function: economic and political. In periods of social peace, the simulacra contributed to the preservation of the status quo, which for the working people meant degrading living and working conditions, whilst in periods of social confrontation they acted as a policing mechanism for the fragmentation of the movement (Koukoules, 1985, p. 20- all translations from the Greek are my own).

<sup>7</sup> Antonis Liakos (1993) *Labor and Politics in Inter-war Greece*. Athens: Institute of Research and Education of Emporiki Bank.

In Seraphim Seferiades most recent work at last the labor movement emerges without however giving extensive analysis to the labor struggle in Thessaloniki in 1936<sup>8</sup>. It is only in the writings of trade union activists that the labor movement is analyzed. In this particular point I mainly refer to the writings of Avraam Benaroya and Giannis Kordatos.

The aim of all these accounts is to promote the view that as far as the workers' movement is concerned, Greece is a special case wherein working people's genuine and autonomous collective action is almost impossible. The uneven way that industrialization occurred in Greece reinforced clientelistic relations on the political level. Hence the wish that one can find similarities between Greek trade union movement and its counterparts in other societies cannot be fulfilled. In this argument the question that is posed is about the role that the trade unions are expected to play. Are trade unions supposed to promote the interests of working people or is it rather to incorporate the working masses into the capitalist political system. In both cases the role of the state is very important because it is the state which has to fulfill the task to set up a system of working people's representation wherein labor organizations can have a lawful operation. The aim of the state is to adopt a system of industrial relations which follows a western European model of industrial relations wherein trade unions are recognized as the lawful representative of working people and under this identity participate in official industrial relations. Yet this is aim is not only typical of the Greek state but of its European counterparts. However, as long as the Greek state recognizes as lawful labor organizations which it can control, it reacts negatively to trade unions which, whilst they represent labor, are considered to be a threat to public order and social peace.

As I see it, the argument which puts in doubt labor's ability to organize horizontally takes for granted the Greek working people's desire to avoid the working class poor status as much as possible. Theodoros Katsanevas, for instance, attempts to prove the validity of this argument when he particularly underlines the exceptionally small size of Greece's industrial plots of land and the fact that, according to the same author, the number of employees is often less than nine. Under these circumstances workers are not able to avoid their employers' close supervision and to get organized in massive trade unions. Yet this argument fails to see that the employers in the small enterprises are virtually on the same level as workers as far as socioeconomic conditions are concerned since they face similar levels of job uncertainty.

### Urban Poor and the Working Class

Yet as far as Greek trade union movement is concerned, I think what is also missing is an extensive analysis of this movement. The working class, whenever it is "visible" to historical research, lacks dignity and honour. That is why the tobacco movement has become so important in historiography for it is the only active Labor that gains respect as a working class movement. However, the lack of respect is not only a Greek phenomenon. English dockers were also viewed as not respectable in the 1900's. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century they managed to organize the new union movement with no assistance from their comrades. Similarly, metal miners on the island of Seriphos fought for an 8-hour day even though they were previously perceived to be utterly poor and undignified. Here I should underline a significant tendency amongst Greek working people to avoid proletarianization as much as they could and to guarantee for them a petty bourgeois class status. That is the reason for the fact that in Greece there is a great number of very small and family run industrial monads where it is difficult to tell the difference between the employers and the employed. Theodoros Katsanevas' *Trade unions in Greece* (1984), argues that the level of trade-union power depends upon the size of the industrial establishments and the number of workers there. Since the pattern of economic growth in Greece did not favour the creation of large-scale industry, the small size of industrial establishments "has been the weakest point of the Greek labor movement particularly for its blue-collar workers' section" (Katsanevas, 1984, p.55).

The question of visibility in the case of the Greek trade union movement is important for two reasons. The first is that for scholars who question the political significance of this movement it is a cause of the Greek working people lacking a clear working class identity. The second is that for scholars who further question the relevance of class segregation for trade union politics the main issue is the narrowness of the trade union identity amongst the working people who are employed in public sector.

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<sup>8</sup> Seferiades, S. "The Constitution of the Greek Working Class (1877 -1936)" in *Elliniki Epitheorisi Politikis Epistimis*, [Greek Political Science Review], issue 6, n.11, pp. 9-78, 1995 (in Greek).

Consequently, if one argues for working class exploitation as a condition of capitalist empowerment in our country, she can be accused of having a left-wing political bias. What, however, is also pointed by Agelos Elefantis (1976) is the fact that the working class identity was considered as a dishonorable one, even for the poorest Greeks<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, the main task of these people was to avoid as much as possible their classification as working class. Family enterprises emerged as the main alternative to worker status in industry, and here subordinate family members could both help and find protection. The statistical data available to us leave no doubt that the great majority of the active Greek working population preferred this solution to belonging to the industrial proletariat. According to Petros Pizaniias (1993), in both 1930 and 1940 the percentage of industrial workers in the country's total labor force was only 2.4 per cent<sup>10</sup>. When the refugees from Asia Minor arrived, they became the reserve army of labor which gave Greek industry a decisive boost by keeping the wages at a very low level as well as bringing in a considerable amount of skills and technical/ organizational know-how. Even so, only 10.6 per cent of them, or 114,000, were employed in industry or similar activities (mines and crafts workshops). All the others preferred to work in different and entirely temporary activities, often having more than two jobs at the same time rather than letting themselves become working class.

Whilst the above information confirms the existence of a great number of urban poor in inter-war Greece, people who were at the same or an even lower financial level with industrial workers, many of them strove to avoid falling into the proletarian category indicates the existence of profoundly negative feelings. It is remarkable that even in nineties, when Pizaniias' *Cities Poor* was published (*ibid.*, p.104) 36 per cent of the lower social strata (defined by income) are employed in jobs connected with their own family networks, whilst 38 per cent work for distant relatives, friends, or neighbours, and only 20 per cent work for strangers. This is a population that has always eluded the official statistics, in terms of numbers as well as regards its reproduction and survival. Moreover, this is a population which is bound up in its own family networks and as a result, did not join trade unions or similar associations. Moreover, as Pizaniias has argued, the refugees from Asia Minor and the peasants who came to the big Greek cities and set up as small-commodity producers in family businesses had a culture of their own. All their needs and desires were focused on the family and the well-being of the family:

The family itself is simultaneously the means and the end. Consequently, every projection and identification... is realized within an extremely close social field. The endless mobility, all pleasure, joy, desire, entertainment, hope for escape, earnings and job security against the accidental, and the solidarity, cultural evolution, etc., all of them have as their principal start and final reference the family. All of them are simply different moments of a unique level of function without any other mediation. Given that... the location of the work-place is very often that of the home, the relations amongst workers are very close and, more important, they are not differentiated... they are overwhelmed with thousands of myths about society. The narrow social surroundings and the concomitant confined spiritual horizon facilitate the re-discovery of spiritual tools with which the self is regarded in a profoundly religious way: This attitude to the self is shaped by belief in the socially powerful, and indifference to one's own social weakness (*ibid* pp. 146-147).

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<sup>9</sup> As Elefantis particularly argued, "Greek workers are of rural origin, the first generation to have lived in urban centres. They have to learn to cope with the city and their job simultaneously. The problems of adaptation in the new social environment are combined with the problems of adaptation to the new place where they have settled for quite a long time; the customs, the cultural models, the morality, the worker's ideology are no different from those of yesterday's peasant. Still, the material conditions of existence and the environment have changed, and that creates a certain imbalance. It is not only the refugees who live with the nostalgia of their lost homeland and the expectation of social settlement. The peasant-worker vacillates between the nostalgia for the idyllic life in the village and expectations of a land of promise which, according to the circumstances and the personal conditions, may take the name of America), employment in the public bureaucracy, marriage for women, a small shop, etc. Nobody wants to think he will remain a worker all his life. With the exception of the craft-workers, a worker's is a dishonourable occupation, and the person who follows it is equally dishonourable, an outcast without self-respect, disapproved by the petty-bourgeois decency, inept, a manual laborer and wage earner, and therefore brutal and insecure" (Agelos Elefantis, 1979, pp. 320-321).

<sup>10</sup> Petros Pizaniias (1993) *Urban Poor*. Athens: Themelio.

### **Women Workers in Greek Industry in the Interwar Era.**

It is easier to categorize working people according to gender and ethnic identity since class as a mean of social categorization is problematic. Moreover trade union movement leaders are accused of lacking concern for the problems of women workers and ethnic minorities. Yet the most exploited workers are usually minorities and women which should give them priority in the Im analysis. Even E.P. Thomson's significant work has been accused of gender bias. According to my view this negative view of Thompson's work is to a great extent unjustified since the famous historian does analyze the impact of trade unions on women who have husbands in the movement. Certainly he does not give details about women's active participation in the labor movement but he does not ignore their presence in the British working class. In fact, as Thompson has written women have suffered a lot as wives of persecuted trade union activists. What is missing from this account is female participation in trade union activism. Similar to this attitude is that of Antonis Liakos who, in his account of the tobacco workers' movement in Northern Greece in the interwar era, argued that the prejudice against women was common both to the bourgeoisie and the working class. Therefore, what is taken for granted in these analyses was women's passivity and lack of active participation in the labor movement. Liakos particularly argued that the increase of the number of women on tobacco workers led to the fragmentation of the labor movement in the tobacco industry and therefore constituted a hazard for the unity of the labor movement amongst tobacco workers (Liakos: 1993: 434). The women's political passivity was essential if the men were to achieve their active trade union participation.

In Greece, women workers in industry were especially badly exploited, but worst of all was the situation of children. We know from Pizanias' work (1993) that, on average, workers in Greek industry at the beginning of this century were very young girls and children (see below for details). They had to work almost as hard as the adult workers, but for very little or sometimes no money at all. The recruitment of female and child labor gave the employers a cheap and (more important) easily controlled work force. For the very young girls, employment in the factories was a situation which the family could tolerate, since they were too young as yet to become a potential threat to the family honour. When they became nubile they were expected to leave the factory job and get married. This meant their reintegration into family life. The limited time that women especially were occupied in industry made it easier for the employers to hide their percentage amongst the workforce.

Industrial work by adult women was thought by their families to undermine the integrity and homogeneity of the family. The fact that women workers were frequently accused of low morality (Burks: 1962, pp. 55-6), was evidence of the general male disapproval of the employment of women. Allowing public life to penetrate into the family's private life was a traumatic experience for all the family. It was bearable only if it was of short duration and confined to the early years of a woman's life. Escape from industrial drudgery did not mean, however, that thereafter female labor was confined to the domestic sphere. In most cases the women had to contribute to the family finances by helping their husbands. Designated as 'family help' in the official Greek statistics, they were working without pay, their only recompense was the protection of the family. The point that I am making here is that poor families were much more exposed to economic exploitation than Pizanias' analysis on economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy has implied. The projection of the poor family as a homogeneous whole, where all members find security and comfort, hides the marginalization even within its own context of the weakest members of the family: women and children.

Employers were very reluctant to improve working conditions, particularly where female and child labor was concerned. The first protective measures were laid down in the Acts of 1911 and 1914. Women and children earned little or nothing because their recruitment was presented by the employers as a charitable and philanthropic action, which provided young people with the chance to achieve skills. The statistics presented by Pizanias (1993) show that in the years 1920, 1928 and 1930, female workers aged from 10 up to 19 amounted to 41.52 per cent, 45.74 per cent, and 54.1 per cent respectively of the total female employees in industry. During the same years, women in the next age group (20 to 29) amounted to 27.44 per cent, 27.47 per cent, and 22.63 per cent respectively. A comparison with the figures for male workers makes it obvious that the average age of female employees was much lower. Again for the years 1920, 1928 and 1930 the percentages for 10-19 year old males were 20.47 per cent, 22.03 per cent, and 29.33 per cent respectively and for the next group (20-29 years) they were not so very different: 24.45 per cent, 27.07 per cent, and 28.34 per cent respectively.

### **Conclusion The relevance of class for Greek trade union movement**

The relevance of class as a concept that is useful in analyzing Greek trade union movement has preoccupied most of the Greek scholars who have written essays about the narrowness of the role of this movement in the lives of Greek working people.

Towards the end of nineties working conditions started to become more flexible, a fact that Greek working people in jobs related to the public sector (these were the teachers of secondary education) did not accept and resisted. The loss of jobs and trade union rights became a popular subject in many studies. Moreover, it did not provoke the effective support of rank and file by the leading trade union organizations notably GSEE and ADEDY. Moreover, trade unions were criticized by Greek governments and were accused of using populist methods and promoting the interests of privileged groups amongst working people. Hence, to a great extent the trade union rights recognized first by the PASOK during the eighties were taken back by their successors in the late nineties, 2000s and in the years of crisis after 2009. An interesting difference between the situation now and that prevailing when PASOK first introduced the labor reforms is that the measures that were then viewed as essential to the modernization of the country are now seen as something that must be scrapped in order to save it. Hence organized Labor and class have once again become an interesting topic for study amongst social scientists<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to particularly refer to some recent work such as Thanasis Alexiou (2006) *Labor, Education and Social Classes. The Historical – Theoretical Framework*. Athens: Papazisis, Andreas Moschonas (1998) *Classes and Social Strata in Contemporary Societies*. Athens: Odysseas. Last but not less important is Andreas Lytras (2000) *Society and Labor. The Role of Social Classes*. Athens and, also Andreas Lytras (2004) *Testing the Class Analysis. Approaching to the Classic Theories on Social Classes*. Athens: Papazisis. All in Greek.