

## DESK RESEARCH GREECE

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### *1. Development of the Greek trade union movement in historical perspective*

#### **1.1. A) Historical overview of the trade unions in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The history of the Greek trade union movement is inextricably tied to the intense socioeconomic, political and ideological processes taking place in Greek society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The roots of the first organized trade union formations date back to the early 1910s.

The creation of Labor Centers, such as the Labor Centers of Volos, Athens and Piraeus in 1908, 1910 and 1912 respectively, marked the primary efforts to organize the dispersed working class at a regional level, under a variety of demands which could be politicized and spark struggles, such as the rise in the prices of goods (Liakos 2016) . In 1909 – one year after the Neoturk Revolution-, in the cosmopolitan city of Thessaloniki which had been a bustling merchant center for trade and craftsmanship in the Ottoman Empire and the whole Balkan area, the first workers' organization, called Federation (*Asociacion Obradera de Salonica*), was created. Before the creation of Federation, the working class of the city, consisting of multiple ethnic groups (Bulgarian, Greek, Jewish, Turks, etc) was organized in 19 trade unions with around 7000 members (Moskov 1979). The initial pioneers of Federation were members of the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Organization (affiliated with the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party) residing in Thessaloniki, and some workers of the Labour Association of Thessaloniki, mostly of Jewish origin (Moskov 1979). The majority of the workers belonging in the active force of Federation were affiliated with the socialist and anarcho-syndicalist ideas circulating in the Balkan region before the outbreak of the Balkan wars.

Despite the dominance of the Jewish element in its circles, Federation tried to hold a multinational profile and adopted a federal organization model based on the class unity of



workers, in order to tackle the nationalist and militarist tendencies resurging in the pre-war Balkans: every ethnic group was separately organized and it elected representative members for Federation's Central Committee and Conference (Katsoridas 2016:7). As a result, Federation, holding under its influence a lot of trade unions in different sectors (tobacco workers, trade employees, metallurgical workers, etc), actively participated in the organization of the first workers' strikes and protests in Thessaloniki, such as the strike and protest for the Labour Day (1<sup>st</sup> of May) in 1909. In the Labour Day strike of the next year (1<sup>st</sup> of May 1910), around 12.000 people went on strike and 7000 workers participated in the demonstrations (Katsoridas 2016).

In the pre-World War I years, the labour forces and workers' movements all over Greece were still fragmented. The idea of centralizing all these spatially separated forces in the form of a National Labour Federation, was becoming prevalent. A couple of attempts in this direction, for example on the initiative of the Piraeus Labor Center in 1916, were inspired by the political situation in Russia and the upcoming revolutions of February and October 1917. These attempts to unify the labor movement at the trade union level, had the characteristic of being accompanied, combined or being part of a strong movement to unify the political labor organizations into a single labor party. From the summer of 1917, new impetus was given to the effort to unify the Greek labor organizations, since an organizing committee had been set up to organize a Pan-Hellenic Socialist Congress.

At the beginning of 1918 the question of the unification of the labor organizations entered its final stretch. In February of this year, on the initiative of the Federation, the Second Socialist Conference was secretly convened in Thessaloniki. In this conference, apart from Federation, other socialist organizations from Athens, Piraeus, Volos and Corfu participated. That Conference decided to organize a new Conference for July 1918. Thus, at the end of July, the Third Socialist Conference ended up convening in October 1918 the National Socialist Congress for the establishment of a party of the working class. At the same time, a trade union conference -held in August with the participation of representatives from the Labor Centers of Thessaloniki, Athens, Piraeus and the union "The Progress"- decides to convene a National Labor Conference for the unification of trade

union organizations. As a result, the founding conference of the National Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) took place between 21 and 28 October (3-10 November) 1918 and the founding conference of the Socialist Workers Party of Greece (SEKE) -which was renamed in 1924 as KKE (Communist Party of Greece)- between 4 and 10 (17 to 23) November of the same year (Katsoridas 2020: 124).

There were three political tendencies formed in the first conference of GSEE: the first one was ideologically closer to the middle-class/bourgeois parties such as the Popular Party and the Liberal Party of Eleftherios Venizelos, the second one was supported by SEKE, and the third one was closer to socialists and anarcho-syndicalists. The first tendency initially wanted the expulsion of the socialists and the independency of GSEE of any political party, which led to a series of political maneuvers in the mid-war years involving the support Venizelos government, but eventually, the second conference in 1920 voted for the collaboration between GSEE and SEKE (Katsoridas 2020: 129). Nevertheless, the political relations between SEKE/KKE and GSEE were terminated in 1925 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> GSEE conference, leading to the predominance of the conservative, right-wing forces in the Confederation.

It is worth noting that the formation of GSEE boosted the emergence of workers' organizations and federations in different sectors (teachers, workers in Telephony and Post, etc.), during this period; this happened along with the quantitative increase of the Greek working class, due to industrialization processes and the 1922 installment of the refugees coming from Asia Minor in major urban centers (Katsoridas 2020:130-138). The second major Confederation was established in 1926, the Confederation of Greek Civil Servants (SDYE). SDYE organized national strikes during these years for claims such as the establishment of the 8h working shift for civil servants and leave benefits (Katsoridas 2020: 139). In its following conferences, GSEE was further dismantled and in 1928 the communist forces of KKE established the United GSEE (EGSEE).

In a parallel direction, the Independent Labor Unions (IAS) emerged, which together with other trade unionists then founded the Panhellenic Confederation Department of Labor (PSE). Thus, since 1931, there were three trade union confederations in the Greek trade

union landscape: the GSEE, which was controlled by the conservative forces, the United GSEE (EGSEE) controlled by the Communist Party, and the PSE, which was under the influence of minor organizations that split from GSEE, the socialists, and other collaborative political groups (such as the Trotskyists «αρχαιομαρξιστές») (Katsoridas 2020: 143). This situation sets the basis for the political division of the Greek trade union movement which will be prevalent for the next decades.

Overall, the state held an intensively repressive stance towards workers' mobilizations during the whole interwar period, which was marked by a rise in labor struggles due to the financial crisis that deteriorated the living and working conditions for the Greek population<sup>1</sup>. This stance was legally institutionalized by the "Idionym" Law<sup>2</sup>, implemented by Venizelos government in 1928-1929, which penalized any political action that confronted the state status quo and thus set the ground for the dissolution of trade unions, when these were deviating from their purposes and being influenced by socialist ideas. Under this legal framework, dozens of labor unions centers and federations were declared illegal or dissolved, while many trade unionists and workers were imprisoned and exiled. This policy was further elaborated by the dictatorship regime of I. Metaxas in 1936, during which all freedoms of trade unions were suspended and a wave of anticommunist persecutions took place. This affected the efforts that had started among the three trade union confederations with the aim of unifying them. The Metaxas regime renamed GSEE into National Confederation of Greek Workers (ESEE) and appointed A. Dimitratos, ex General Secretary of GSEE who was reelected in the position in 1937, as Deputy Minister of Labour, in its effort to hold trade unions under total state control according to the example of fascist Italy (Katsoridas 2020: 153).

WWII and the emergence of Greek Resistance Front (EAM) against the German-Italian occupation set the ground for changes in the trade union movement. The creation of the

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<sup>1</sup> A prime example of those struggles is the 1928 strike of maritime/port workers and the May 1936 uprising in Thessaloniki by the strike of tobacco workers, which was violently suppressed, resulting in the death of 12 people. For more, see Katsoridas 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Law 4429/24-7-1929 "on social security measures status and protection of citizens' liberties". Source: <https://www.rizospastis.gr/story.do?id=1341062>

Labour EAM (EEAM) marked the reunification of the three confederations (ESEE, EGSEE and Independent Trade Unions) and therefore, of the Greek trade union movement. The immediate aims of the Labor EAM were the organization of daily struggle of the working people under the economic and social conditions of the Occupation, over demands such as the fair distribution of food and rations, wage increase, the fight against the terrorism imposed on trade unions by the occupation forces; the forms of struggle ranged from the mildest ones (e.g. memorandums to the government, reduction of efficiency at work, group declaration of illness, etc.) to more dynamic ones, such as strike mobilizations against the conscription and protest demonstrations across the country (Katsoridas 2021:150). EEAM and the workers affiliated with it contributed to the broader anti-fascist sociopolitical struggle in Greece during those years<sup>3</sup> (Kastoridas 2020: 155).

As for the sector of public servants, they managed to organize the first strike in Occupied Europe in 1942, on the initiative of the Central Public Employee Committee (KYE), illegal and controlled by KKE (Katsoridas 2020: 154). In this direction, just before the outbreak of the Greek Civil War, the Labour Anti-Fascist Coalition (ERGAS) was created in 1945 as a coalition of political groups associated with the Left and especially EEAM. ERGAS held a majority in the 1946 8th Conference of the GSEE, taking around 80-85% of the seats. This conference, which showed big influence of the left political groups among the workers, was cancelled later by the Council of State, and as a result, the government imposed again a right-wing administration in GSEE.

As the political polarization between Left and Right in Greek society was becoming more intensified, leading to the outbreak of the Civil War, the conditions for trade unionism became unfavorable. They were characterized by: undemocratic methods for altering the will of the workers, state interventions, control of the official confederation of GSEE by “labor paternalism” practices, imposition of certificates of civil obedience (*«πιστοποιητικά κοινωνικών φρονημάτων»*), exiles and imprisonments of trade unionists, restriction of civil liberties, operation of the trade union department of Security, employer terrorism and

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<sup>3</sup> In the Labor Day of 1944 (1/5/1944), 200 leftists, prisoners of the Metaxas regime, were executed in Kaisariani by German occupational forces. The labor unions declared a national strike on that day.

deletion from the GSEE, as well as from the Labor Centers and the Federations, of those trade unions which were influenced by the Left, such as a lot of trade unions participating in the Labor Center of Thessaloniki (Marantzidis 1998). As a result, the autonomy of the trade union movement in this period was heavily restricted.

The trade union movement in the public sector was also fragmented. In 1947, trade unions in the public sectors, such as members of the trade union of Telephony-Telegraphy-Post workers (TTT), of the trade union of the Teachers and of the trade union of the Court Servants, among others, convened and created ADEDY, the National Confederation of the Civil Servants, which functioned as a continuation of then-defunct SDYE (Katsoridas 2020:161). Civil servants coordinated by ADEDY called for national strikes until 1953, but the radicality of their claims started diminishing in later years, as ADEDY adopted a more collaborative stance towards the government and the king (Liaskos 1992). Parallel to that, the government, in its attempt to build an international populist profile, was pressured to set again in motion a collective bargaining system, even though this was not technically applied – the government still controlled the wage levels.

The postwar years were marked by the big development of Greek capitalism and the increase of the number of the working class, especially workers in the infrastructural sectors, such as the construction workers/builders<sup>4</sup>. In an effort to address the issues to the workers' struggles caused by official conservative trade unionism expressed by GSEE, the Movement for the Freedom of The Trade Unions (KES) was created in 1949, which was later merged with the Labor Trade Union Movement (ESKE) and formed the Democratic Syndicalist Movement (DSK) in 1955. As a political trade union force, DSK coordinated the actions of various socialists, communists, social democrats, leftists, etc, and its goal was to restore the unity of the trade union movement, fight for the syndicalist freedoms, contribute to the development of class consciousness among the workers and reinstate trade unions that were either defunct or deleted from GSEE during the previous years (Katsoridas 2020: 166-167).

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<sup>4</sup> The builders were pioneers of the workers' struggles in the 60s and organized mass strikes. The strike activity during 1962-1966 in Greece was among the highest in Europe. For more see Katsoridas 2020: 167-171

This process culminated to the creation of the Movement of the 115 Collaborating Labor Organizations (SEO-115), in February 1962, at the initiative of the Federation of Electricity-Public Utility, the Federation of Press Workers and the Panhellenic Federation of Accountants, in order to face together the government bill that violated social insurance and trade union rights (Livieratos 2003). SEO 115, which was joined by syndicates deleted from GSEE, fought for the democratization of the trade union movement and participated, among others, in the organization of the strike and protests in the July 1965 demonstrations, when the legally elected Prime Minister Papandreou was denounced by the King (Katsoridas 2020: 169).

The conservative trade unionism of GSEE embraced the establishment of the military Junta in 1967 (Marantzidis 1998), while ADEDY was also supporting the propaganda of the state. The state forces of the Junta impeded the functionality of a lot of trade unions, especially those influenced by the Left, exiled prominent syndicalist officials, appointed state officials in the federations who supported the status quo, created “ghost” trade unions for securing power relationships inside the Federations (*σωματεία-«σφραγίδες»*) and overall restricted major syndicalist freedoms. Thus, this period, until 1973, is marked by the absence of big strikes and demonstrations, despite the low salaries and the lack of political freedoms – the Left, and some forces of the Communist Party tried to establish illegally some minor anti-dictatorship syndicalist organizations, such as the United Anti-Junta Syndicalist Movement (ASEK) (Katsoridas 2020: 171-172).

After the fall of the Junta in 1974, the trade union landscape is characterized by the relative normalization processes that are taking place. The state interventions are not absent, however. The establishment of the Law 330/1976 for the private sector, and its equivalent (643/77) for the public sector, strengthened the anti-strike mechanisms by legalizing lock-outs and by prohibiting political strikes (Katsoridas 2021: 152). The rise of the trade unionism in industrial workers is also a new phenomenon in this era: major trade unions in big factories were created, such as in LARKO, PITSOS, ITT and other industrial sectors. Trade unions started to develop coordinating bodies, such as the Public Servants Coordinating Committee, and the Associated Fighting Democratic Labor Organizations (SADEO) in 1977,



acting as a radical counterweight to the government-controlled GSEE (Katsoridas 2021: 152).

The Law 1264/1982 by the social-democratic government of PASOK abolished the previous anti-strike law and brought again the democratization of the trade unionism. In this context, between 9-11 December 1983, the 22nd Conference of the GSEE took place, in Athens, signifying a unifying moment for the trade union movement in Greece. All the Labor Centers and all the Federations took part and all political factions were represented, under democratic procedures; the members voted for claims regarding the workers' control over the production through democratic representation committees (Katsoridas 2020: 177). As for the public sector, something similar happened at ADEDY, where from December 1-4, 1983, the 25th Congress of the Confederation took place, which was an important step in its democratic rejuvenation.

The mid-1980s are characterized by a new crisis in the trade union movement. The government of PASOK imposes a series of austerity policy measures in Greek society, such as the devaluation of the drachma by 15% and the increase in the tariffs of Public Organizations (Electricity-DEH, and Telecommunications-OTE) and the Presidential Decree of 1985 states that wage increases above the income policy are prohibited (Katsoridas 2015: 177-178). This situation gives an impetus to a national strike movement and creates political conflicts inside the trade union movement. Seven syndicalist members of PASKE (the syndicalist branch of PASOK) who opposed the government measures and had a big influence on several Federations (Livieratos 2009: 149), were deleted from GSEE and created a coalition with the trade unionists of the KKE/Communist Party (ESAK-S) and AEM (KKE Esoterikou, a split of the Communist Party).

Normalization was achieved again at the unifying 25th Congress of the GSEE (April 1989), with the participation of all trade union factions, in order to address the fragmentation of the trade unionism. The existence of all political currents inside GSEE lasted throughout the 1990s (Katsoridas 2020: 179). During those years, an overall massive growth of trade union struggles is noted, spreading among different sectors of the economy, such as industrial



workers in big factories, construction workers, shipping and mining sector, banking sector, teachers, servants in the broader public sector (DEKO), etc. In these sectors, there's a high trade union density (Zisimopoulos 2019:94). This situation indicates the re-emergence of class polarization in Greek society according to Katsoridas (2015: 154).

On April 3, 1999, at a nationwide union meeting and trade unionists, the All Workers' Militant Front (PAME) was created by trade unionists, mainly of the KKE. The purpose of PAME, according to its declaration, was the formation of a militant front in trade union movement expressing the interests of the Greek working class, against the compromises that official trade unionism was making, by taking the side of capital (Katsoridas 2020: 180). The "social partnership" model, which was, among others, built on the close ties of official trade union leaders with the governments, in order to ensure "social peace" in the context of the European Union integration of Greece (Zisimopoulos 2019: 93), along with the subsequent bureaucratization of the trade union confederations and their transformation into partners of social dialogue (Bithymitris and Kotsonopoulos 2018: 106), were the major characteristics of the new turn that the trade union movement takes in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The trade union landscape rapidly changed after the onset of the financial crisis. The outbreak of the Memorandum period was marked by an explosion of strikes in the period 2010-2012, in different sectors of the economy. Nevertheless, in the following years, there has been a steady decline in workers' struggles and trade unionism (Katsoridas 2020:199). The restrictive financial measures, the broad disappointment due to SYRIZA's governmental policies, the reduction of wages, social insurance and working rights, the rise of unemployment, the precarization of labor relations, including the dominance of forms of undeclared labor, had a toll on the radical potential of the working people. The Memoranda brought catalytic changes to the collective bargaining system, affecting the power of trade unionism, which will be further analyzed in the following chapters. New initiatives on the side of trade unions in recent years, both in terms of new forms of organization / fight and political direction/agenda, need to be further explored.

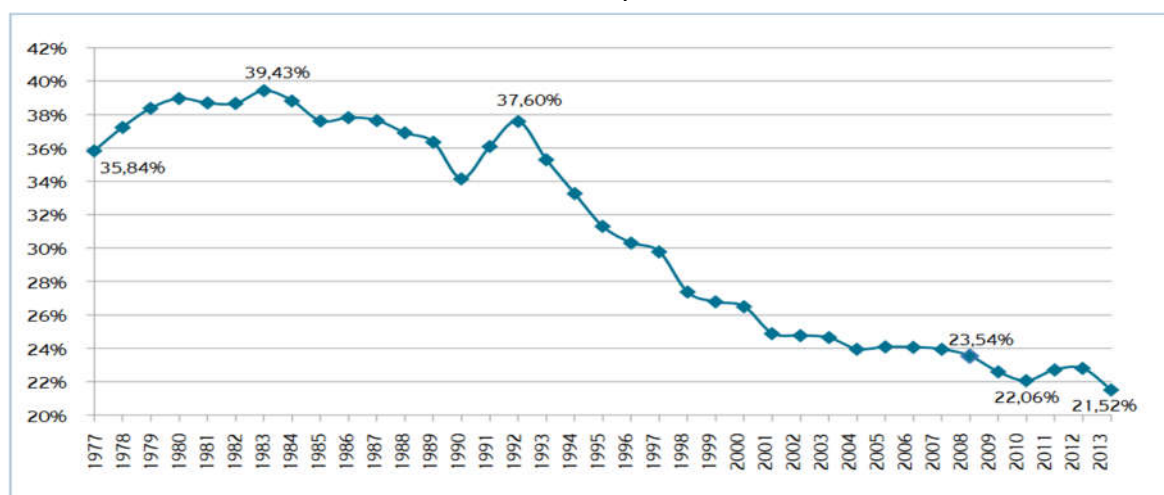
## ***B) Organizations, membership, density***

Nowadays, there are two main historical trade unions confederations in Greece. GSEE, as mentioned earlier, covers the workers in the private sector and as well as workers in undertakings under public control (DEKO - banks, public transport, the post office, electricity and water suppliers). ADEDY represents public sector employees exclusively (in education, ministries, local authorities, public hospitals). The main employer organizations are: the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises (SEV), which originally represented the main industrial undertakings and now also represents major undertakings in other sectors, the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen and Merchants (GSEVEE), which represents small industry and craft, the Hellenic Confederation of Commerce and Entrepreneurship (ESEE), representing the commercial sector, and the Association of Greek Tourism Enterprise (SETE), representing the tourist trade (hotels, travel agencies, transport, etc.). The recorded density of employers' organizations in 2017 was 52.7% (OECD 2021).

According to Greek law, there are three levels of trade union organization, based on a hierarchical structure which is organized on a system of proportional representation. On the first level, there are the trade unions (*πρωτοβάθμια σωματεία*), which are legally autonomous and organize workers at a sectoral, occupational or enterprise level, by defending their interests. The second level organizations are the Federations (*Ομοσπονδίες*) or the regional Labor Centers (*Εργατικά Κέντρα*), comprising 2 or more trade unions; in the case of the public sector, the second level organizations have a sectoral or national character according to the governmental or ministerial structure. Lastly, the third level structures are confederations such as the GSEE-ADEDY and are made up of second level organisations which are represented through electoral processes in the Conferences of the Confederations. In 2016, GSEE comprised about 150 second level organisations, 68 sectoral/professional federations and 79 regional Labor Centers (Katsoridas 2021: 257). ADEDY comprises around 46 federations. The sectors of the civil servants in Public Administration (POE-OTA), the Federation of Professors in Middle Education (OLME), the Federation of Teachers (DOE) and the Federation of Employees in Public Hospitals (POEDIN), make up for over 65% of its force (Katsoridas 2021: 256).

Organization at the lower level is highly fragmented. In the last decades, a lot of base-level/grassroots trade unions or workers 'collectives in different sectors were created, which do not participate actively in the main Confederations. The conditions of their creation and their range of actions will be further analyzed in following sections.

**Table 1.** Trade Union Density in Greece, 1977-2013.



Source : Visser 2013, cited in Katsoridas 2021: 266

Trade union density in Greece has experienced a major decline in recent years, after the onset of the financial crisis and its impact on the labor market and labor relations (Table 1). According to a recent study by the Labor Institute of GSEE cited by Katsoridas (2021: 268-269), which was based on statistical data from the 2013 Conferences of GSEE-ADEDY, the number of workers who are members of the confederations is estimated to be 690.247. The estimation for the trade union density in the public/civil servant sector that ADEDY covers, is around 54,5%, while in the private sector and in DEKO (broader public sector, Water-Electricity-Post employees), which are covered by GSEE, the estimation falls to 21,3% (Table 3). As for the economic and occupational sub-sectors that are covered by GSEE, the density is higher in DEKO than in the commercial, logistics and food supplying sectors.

According to the OECD database, the overall trade union density in Greece fell to around 19% in 2016. In Katsoridas' study of 2021 for the same year 2016, the number of the trade union members is estimated to be 599.161 and the trade union density, based on the

calculation of the real size of the working class in Greece, including those who work in undeclared, atypical, precarious or temporary forms of labour, is 20,3% (2021: 281). Therefore, only 1/5 of workers was organized in trade unions (Katsoridas 2021: 283) and between 2010-2016, during the peak of the memoranda policies, trade union confederations of GSEE-ADEDY lost around 185.000 members (ibid., 277). The trade union density rate for the post-memorandum and pandemic/post-pandemic years needs to be further investigated, as no relevant reports have been conducted yet.

### ***1.2 Overview of collective bargaining in Greece***

Before the Memoranda Period, especially during the period 1955-1990, the collective bargaining held its centralized character. It took place at a national and occupational level; collective bargaining at sectoral level was not defined by the Law, and the negotiations at the enterprise level were taking place only by exception in large enterprises or in certain public utilities (Zisimopoulos 2019: 91). The favourability principle was also legally foreseen and the time extension for collective agreements was regularly implemented (Zisimopoulos 2019: 91).

The first attempt towards a partial decentralization of the bargaining system was done in 1990s, when Greek capital was aiming for the entry of Greece in EU and the Greek economy started undergoing a neoliberalization process. The Law 1876/1990 (Free collective bargaining bill) set the ground for collective bargaining at enterprise level. Nevertheless, collective bargaining at the sectoral or occupational level remained dominant and the role of OMED (Organization for Mediation and Arbitration) in settling labor disputes, was pivotal for the smooth collective bargaining process.

During the period 1990-2010, the collective bargaining coverage had been very high, reaching around 100%, despite the overall decline in trade union density, as mentioned earlier (Visser 2019 cited by Zisimopoulos 2019:93). 185 sectoral and occupational CBAs were being signed on average every year, as well as and 167 enterprise ones (OMED 2018). According to Zisimopoulos (2022: 26-27), the centralized and multi-employer character of the collective bargaining system prior to 2010 can be attributed to three factors: a) the

powerful organization of the working class in post-Junta Greece and its radical direction, as shown by the big trade union density, especially in industrial and infrastructure sectors b) the character of Greek economy, which was defined by the prevalence of small scale enterprises, instead of big ones -which would allow bargaining on the enterprise level- and lastly c) the priorities of the Greek state and capital to achieve “social peace” towards the path of the European integration (accession to the EU, Olympic Games).

The Memoranda policies of 2010-2018 imposed by the EU and the IMF aimed at restructuring the Greek labour market in the context of a domestic devaluation strategy. Amongst other measures (such as the reduction of minimum wage, cut of salaries in public and private sector, abolition of public sector benefits, such as the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> salaries-, social welfare cuts and privatizations), the Memoranda brought structural changes to the collective bargaining system towards the direction of decentralization (such as the abolition of favorability principle for sectoral CBAs and strengthening of enterprise collective bargaining).

This decentralization process led to the reduction of the CBAs concluded at sectoral and occupational level (multi-employer bargaining) during the years 2011-2017 and in the same time, to the multiplication of CBAs concluded at enterprise level by enterprise trade unions, or associations of persons<sup>5</sup> in the enterprise (Table 4). From 2011 to 2019, individual employment contracts were on the rise (Table 3). The strengthening of enterprise bargaining, the normalization of the individual employment contracts and the retreat of sectoral and occupational collective bargaining was indicative of a trend towards further individualization of employment terms and contributed to broader wage reductions and deteriorating working conditions<sup>6</sup>. According to ETUI (2018: 56), the reduction of

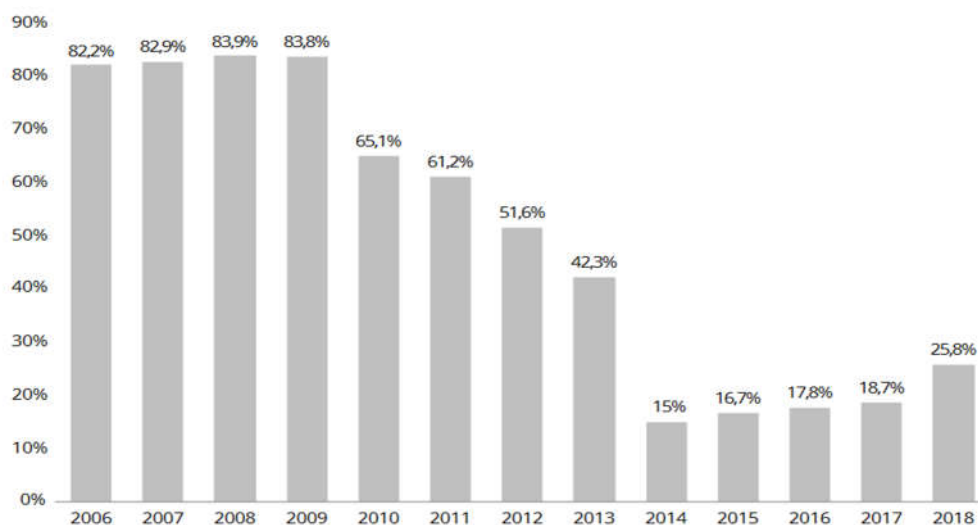
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<sup>5</sup> “Associations of persons” (Law 1264/1982): first-level organization of employees in enterprises of up to 40 employees, where the existence of a trade union is absent. They become permanent with the Memorandum II (2011) legal change.

<sup>6</sup> As Katsampouras and Koukiadaki (2019: 279) highlight: “In an attempt to create ‘a more flexible bargaining system’ (ILO 2011: 26), a new type of company collective agreement, namely ‘special company collective agreements’, was introduced allowing opt-outs from wage levels agreed at the industry level, provided notification requirements were met. The agreements were intended to ‘exhaust’ industry-level bargaining, by allowing company-level bargaining that was expected to deprive the higher-level agreements of their protective effect. There was evidence of limited take-up by the actors: instead, wage cuts and other changes were usually the result of agreements with employees on an individual basis.”

wages in Greece was 19.1% for the years 2010-2017. As for the arbitration decisions recorded, their number was respectively low during the years 2015-2017: 5 were recorded in 2015, 14 in 2016 and 12 in 2017. None of them was related to a labor dispute at local or sectoral level (Kouzis and Kapsalis 2020: 45).

**Table 2. Collective bargaining coverage rate, 2006-2018.**



Source INE-GSEE 2023, based on data from ILO

**Table 3. Collective bargaining coverage rate (workers excluded by law from collective bargaining are not calculated) 2007-2016.**

Year	Workers with the right to participate in collective bargaining		Workers excluded by law from collective bargaining	Total wage employment	Collective bargaining coverage rate*
	Employees covered by collective agreements	Uncovered or employees under individual employment contracts (estimate)			
2007	2,068,111	0	882,489	2,950,600	100.00%
2008	2,120,228	0	875,547	2,995,775	100.00%
2009	2,071,276	0	877,349	2,948,625	100.00%
2010	1,958,827	0	867,573	2,826,400	100.00%
2011	1,581,568	179,323	825,184	2,586,075	89.82%
2012	1,206,948	384,191	749,186	2,340,325	75.85%
2013	937,020	547,537	728,693	2,213,250	63.12%
2014	339,600	1,208,806	714,719	2,263,125	21.93%
2015	391,500	1,258,142	698,233	2,347,875	23.73%
2016	431,800	1,264,350	724,400	2,420,550	25.46%

Source: Visser 2019, elaborated by Zisimopoulos 2019 and cited in Zisimopoulos 2019: 98



**Table 4. CBAs concluded, 2010-2022**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Sectoral and national occupational CBAs</b>	<b>Local occupational CBAs</b>	<b>Enterprise CBAs</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rate of enterprise CBAs over the total CBAs concluded</b>
<b>2010</b>	65	14	227	306	74,18
<b>2011</b>	38	7	170	215	79,07
<b>2012</b>	23	6	976	1.005	97,11
<b>2013</b>	14	0	409	423	96,69
<b>2014</b>	14	5	286	305	93,77
<b>2015</b>	12	7	263	282	93,26
<b>2016</b>	10	6	318	334	95,21
<b>2017</b>	15	6	244	265	92,08
<b>2018</b>	30	9	300	339	83,33
<b>2019</b>	20	4	193	217	88,94
<b>2020</b>	15	3	174	192	90,63
<b>2021</b>	17	9	182	208	87,50
<b>2022</b>	17	8	217	242	89,66

*Source: INE-GSEE 2023*

The collective bargaining system reformation was parallel to the overall retreat of the trade union movement. Despite the radicalization of collective action that was noticed during the first period of the memoranda and the rise of strikes (2010-2012), the political hegemony in the trade union movement, marked by the conservative stance of the main trade union confederations to the implemented policies by the government and the IMF, contributed to the weakening of the trade union forces and diminished the workers' trust in them (Bithymitris and Kotsonopoulos 2018: 116). In addition to the deteriorating economic and



working conditions, the large appeal of the idea, among trade unions members, that the SYRIZA-ANEL party could overthrow the memoranda if they became government, was an important parameter that set the ground for the retreat of trade union movement and the loss of a class-oriented strategy (Papanikolopoulos 2018:45-50).

These factors, along with the big increase in the unemployment rate to almost 25% due to the austerity policies and the overall explosion in undeclared or atypical/flexible forms of employment, led to the subsequent decrease of the percentage of employees covered by valid collective agreements, as displayed in table 2 and 3. As Kapsalis (2021) notes, the percentage of part time/rotating employment contracts versus full-time ones, from 21% in 2009, rises up to around 55% of the total employment contracts conducted in 2018<sup>7</sup>, indicating thus a massive shift towards further flexibilization and precarization of labor relations. For years 2011-2018, the large majority of the CBAs concluded and labor disputes settled, was noted in the tertiary sector of the economy; collective bargaining was further weakened in the secondary sector of manufacturing and constructions (Zisimopoulos 2022: 38)

After the official expiry of the memoranda, the SYRIZA-ANEL government in 2018 made an attempt to reinstate the pre-crisis framework for collective bargaining, by bringing back the favourability principle and the extension of sectoral CBAs. According to ILO, the collective bargaining coverage rate in 2018 rose to 25.8%. Nevertheless, the extension of the CBAs heavily depended on the employers' side and their dominant role in the negotiation processes (Zisimopoulos 2019: 100). Despite the partial efforts of the government, the negative conditions for collective regulation of employment conditions were not adequately reversed (Kapsalis 2021). The neoliberal New Democracy government induced further legal changes to the collective bargaining system, by partially reintroducing the memoranda framework (restriction of the favorability principle and the right to arbitration, etc); as a result, labor relations become even more deregulated. According to the recent report of INE-GSEE Institute, 38 sectoral and occupational CBAs were valid for the year 2022 (24 new ones concluded in the same year plus 14 from previous years, under the 3

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<sup>7</sup> Based on data from the employment database ERGANI.

year renewal). They cover around 735.000 employees, which translates to 29% of employed workforce. However, only 5 of those CBAs have been legally declared as mandatory for all employees of the sector/occupation (hotel workers, employees in the tourism/food industry and cosmetic workers). All the other ones are only valid for the members of the signatory employees' and employers' organizations; even this parameter cannot be fully cross-verified, since it is a usual practice for many enterprises to abstain from joining employers' organizations, in order to avoid the application of CBA terms (INE-GSEE 2023:124).

Overall, the memorandum and post-memorandum agenda regarding industrial relations in Greece, seem to contribute to the retreat of the collective bargaining process, especially in sectoral and occupational level and to the further weakening of the role of trade unions in protecting workers' rights. Nowadays, in the absence of strong sectoral and occupational bargaining, the majority of employees are covered only by the minimum wage, which is set by decision of the minister of Labour.

### ***1.3 Assessment of the Covid 19 crisis impact on the trade union movement***

The Covid-19 pandemic heavily affected small-scale enterprises and increased unemployment, leading Greek economy to an overall retreat of around 9% for 2020 (INE-GSEE 2022: 15). Around 25,4% of total employees were suspended in different sectors of the economy in March 2020 and according to Eurofound (2021), Greece is the EU country with the biggest percentage of employees who lost their job during the pandemic.

Differently to other European countries, the suspension of employment contracts at the start of the Greek lockdown period and the context of protection of working rights during the suspension, was not a product of social dialogue negotiation between the social partners (trade unions, employers and state), based on the terms of previous CBAs; instead, it was a set of emergency measures imposed unilaterally by the government, which enterprises had the right to implement if needed, without noticing the employees' side in advance. This left room for misconduct on the employers' side in relation to the protection of agreed labor relations, such as coercion to unsafe, undeclared,

flexible/rotating work, even in cases of remote work (Kapsalis 2021). In addition, the state financial assistance of 534 euros per month or 800 euros for 45 consecutive days of non-work, was provided horizontally to suspended employees, regardless of their previous employment terms and negotiated wage, similarly to an unemployment benefit, in contrast with other European countries (Zisimopoulos 2022, Kapsalis 2021). The absence of collective regulation for the protection of working rights in Greece in the context of the pandemic and the subsequent reduction of the scope of trade unions in this process, was facilitated by the already existing framework of deregulated labor relations, established in the memorandum and post-memorandum era (Kapsalis 2021).

Parallel to the massive shift towards remote work/work-from-home in many labor sectors, as part of the government's plan to curb the effects of the pandemic, trade unions were also expected to shift their functions into the digital realm: according to Laws 4756/2020 and 4808/2021, first-level trade unions could legally organize their general assemblies. According to the same laws, trade unions of all levels, including federations and confederations, could digitally organize the meetings of their managing boards and elect their official representatives through remote digital communication platforms until 31.10.2021. Furthermore, the term of office of the elected representatives in trade union administrative boards could be extended for the whole aforementioned time period (Arnogiannaki 2021: 16-19). Those state interventions, even if applied under the exceptional conditions of the state of emergency, had the potential effect of limiting the internal autonomy of trade union functions and the transparency of their internal procedures, since their members were not physically present during the voting process. The transition to this new condition was made possible by the precedent implementation of the Law 4635/2019, which foresees electronic voting for trade unions.

What's more, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed a lot of the underlying political tensions inside the trade union movement. At the start of the pandemic, the main trade union confederation of GSEE adopted a consensual stance to the policies that government imposed, by publicly calling its members, members of both trade union and employers' organisations, political parties, civil society organisations and the Church, to comply with

the state vaccination plan and “create a united national front against the dangers of the pandemic”.<sup>8</sup> This direction received a lot of criticism by trade unions affiliated to PAME (Communist Party) and the Left, since it did not highlight the responsibility of the government to increase funding for the public healthcare system and provide bigger financial support for the suspended workers in different sectors (food industry, art workers, etc.). Mobilizations and industrial actions remained rather scarce during the pandemic period, but some processes of trade union revitalization and strategy renewal started taking place in the last two years. Their impact will be further elaborated in the last section of the study.

## 2. Legal and political-economic context for trade unions

### 2.1 The legal framework

The right to freedom of collective action and association is legally foreseen in one of the first post-independence Constitutions of Greece, the one of 1864. However, the first legal recognition of the trade union freedom to negotiate (still in a non-regulatory way, “*worker groups’ agreements*”) wages and conditions of employment came some decades later, in the Law of 1914 under the liberal E. Venizelos government (Kouzis and Kapsalis 2020: 13). There was a major delay until the terminology of collective bargaining officially appeared in Greek legal system; this was achieved in 1935 under the pressure of the massive mid-war strike actions. Two National General CBAs were concluded in 1936 under the Metaxas regime which set the terms for the employment conditions and the wages, in a corporatist context of state intervention.

During WWII Occupation, collective agreements were absent and the state had the power to set the rate of wages and employment terms. This situation lasted until the early postwar years, until the implementation of the Law 3239/1955, where some partial amendments

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<sup>8</sup> Campaign of GSEE against Covid-19. 17.3.21.

Source: <https://gsee.gr/deltia-typou/%CF%80%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B9%CE%B1-covid-19-%CE%BC%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AC-%CE%BC%CE%B1%CF%82-%CF%8C%CF%80%CE%BB%CE%B1-%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%AD%CF%81%CF%89/>

towards the direction of freedom of collective bargaining were achieved. Despite those improvements, the role of the state and specifically of the Minister of Labor remained crucial for the collective regulations, and industrial actions, such as strikes, were forbidden for 45 days in case of arbitration (Kouzis and Kapsalis 2020: 16). State could exercise compulsory arbitration in order to resolve the collective disputes and in addition and it was entitled not to approve or to modify collective agreements if their terms were contrary to the general governmental economic or social policy (Zisimopoulos 2019:91). Under the Junta regime, trade unions were under the total influence of the government, national CBAs were abolished and sectoral or occupational CBAs could be only concluded and applied to the members of the two main most representative organizations, which were often controlled by the state.

The first legal attempts to establish internal democracy and autonomy for the trade unions were brought with the Law 1264/1982. This Law regulated the representation and functioning of trade unions, so they could fully represent the economic, social, working and syndicalist rights of the workers. Trade unions become independent, they are not allowed to fund or be funded by political parties and they cannot engage in profitable activities, but they have the right to create solidarity funds for their members. The three levels of trade union representation are also regulated by the same Law (first level: trade unions of 20 members and up or associations of persons up to 40 people in the enterprise in case of absence of trade union/local organizations, second level: Federations/Labor Centers, and third level: Confederations consisting of at least two second level organizations). As for the organization of trade unions according to the type of work, there are three types: occupational trade unions which gather employees of the same profession in different enterprises or sectors, sectoral trade unions which gather employees of different professions but within the same sector, and enterprise/company trade unions.

The Law 1876/1990 was the core of the legal framework for trade union function and collective bargaining in Greece prior to Memoranda policies. Aligned with the European standards, it was adopted unanimously by the political parties and established a multi-level bargaining system with four types of collective bargaining agreement (CBA) for the private

sector: the national general intersectoral agreement (EGSSE), the national sectoral or occupational CBAs, local sectoral/occupational CBAs and enterprise CBAs (ETUI 2017). CBAs would define the terms of employment, such as working hours, wages, overtime work, leaves, benefits, safety and hygiene measures. Nationally, the trade union confederation (GSEE) and employers' organizations would negotiate the national general collective agreement (EGSEE) laying down minimum employment conditions and the national minimum wage. The State is not involved in the negotiations between social partners, but makes the minimum wage that they set a statutory requirement (ETUI 2017). As for the CBAs at the enterprise level, the prerequisite was the existence of a trade union with at least 50 employees (Zisimopoulos 2019: 92). On this basis, national or regional CBAs can be signed for various sectors or occupations, or CBAs for enterprises.

According to the same Law and until the start of the crisis in 2010, the principle of favorability for the protection of employees was applied to possible differences between sectoral and enterprise CBAs, and between all other CBAs and the National General CBA. In addition, the right of extension guarantees that sectoral, enterprise and national CBAs are compulsory for all employees, given that the employers' organizations which participated in the conclusion of the CBA employ 51% of the total employees (Kolaiti 2022: 17). Furthermore, the role of the Mediation and Arbitration Service (OMED)<sup>9</sup> which was created after the abolition of compulsory arbitration on behalf of the state, became crucial for the resolution of collective labor disputes and issues caused by deadlock in the CBA negotiations. Unilateral arbitration of the employees to OMED services was guaranteed, and the right to strike was disconnected from the negotiation phase of the CBAs, suspended only for 10 days in case of arbitration (Kouzis and Kapsalis 2020: 18). CBAs would also remain legally valid for 6 months after their expiry.

During this period, there were also major efforts in establishing a tripartite system of social dialogue. The Greek Economic and Social Committee (OKE) was established in 1994

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<sup>9</sup> O.M.E.D., established in 1990 with Law 1876/1990, is managed by an eleven-member Board of Directors, consisting of representatives of the social partners (GSEE, SEV, GSEVEE, ESEE, SETE, SBE), the President, elected unanimously by the representatives of the social partners and a representative of the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, as an observer without the right to vote.

(constitutionally recognized in 2001) and it was organized on the basis of tripartite division of the interests represented: three groups, one of employers/entrepreneurs, one of private/public sector employees, and one including other categories, such as farmers, self-employed persons, local government and consumers (Patra 2012). According to the report of ILO (Patra 2012:10), “OKE issues opinions either on its own initiative or after receiving draft bills from the competent Minister or from Members of Parliament. ‘Opinions’ are drawn up by ad hoc working committees representing tripartite division.”

The changes introduced after the debt crisis aiming at reducing labor costs and improving the competitiveness of the enterprises, have destabilized the collective bargaining system and their effects last until nowadays. Amongst the most major legal reforms that Memoranda I and II (2010-2011, Laws 3845/2010, 3863/2010, 3899/2010, 4024/2011) brought, were: the abolition of the favorability principle for the sectoral CBAs over the enterprise ones, the abolition of CBAs in the public sector/civil service which are against the governmental financial policy, the suspension of the extension principle to occupational and sectoral CBAs until 2015, and lastly, the strengthening of the collective bargaining on enterprise level (an enterprise CBA can be signed by an enterprise trade union or an “association of persons” which comprises at least 3/5 of the employees working in the enterprise, regardless of their total number) (Zisimopoulos 2019: 96-97). In addition, in 2012, a 22 % nominal reduction in the minimum wage was set by national agreement (32 % for the under-25s - Law 4046/2012, *subminimum wage*) by Act of the Ministerial Council. Also, the time extension of expired CBAs was restricted to 3 months instead of 6. Under the Law 4093/2012, the National General CBA was restructured so that it could determine only the non-wage conditions of employment for organizations belonging to the signatory employers’ organizations. Until nowadays, minimum wage is not negotiated between the social partners; instead, it is defined by decision of the Minister of Labour. Arbitration was also neutralized.

According to ETUI (2017): “in November 2012, following complaints from the Greek trade union organisations (GSEE, ADEDY, etc.), the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association called on Greece to bring the labour relations system back into line with fundamental



rights. The government of SYRIZA, elected in January 2015 wished to reinstate collective bargaining but faced strong opposition from creditors. The bill drawn up by the government (April 2015) for reinstatement of collective bargaining and gradual restoration of the minimum wage to its 2012 level was submitted to the Greek Economic and Social Committee (OKE) for consultation, but was never tabled in the Greek parliament due to pressure from the Troika based on the claim that this was a 'unilateral act' not compatible with the adjustment programme."

Under Memorandum III (2015, Laws 4472/2017, 4475/2017), the previous measures, such as the prevalence of enterprise CBAs over sectoral and occupational ones and the reversion of the favorability principle, as well as the suspension of the extension principle to occupational sectoral CBAs, were extended until the end of the National Adjustment Programme approx. in 2022-2023 (Kouzis and Kapsalis : 23). Also, all new legislative initiatives by the Greek Government must be first approved by the creditors and must be in accordance with the goals of sustainable and inclusive growth (ETUI 2017).

The SYRIZA-ANEL government brought back some of the pre-memoranda regulations of collective bargaining, such as the favorability principle, the right of extension for CBAs and the abolition of the subminimum wage for under 25s. Nevertheless, despite the legal attempts to reinstate collective bargaining to its pre-crisis levels, the changes of the Memoranda policies eventually devalued the role of sectoral and occupational CBAs; on that basis, they brought further wage differentiation amongst employees of the same sector and individualized the collective regulation of employment conditions. It's worth noticing that in the case of the unfavorable restructuring of the National General CBA (EGSEE), the role of trade unions as equal social partners has become weakened (Kazakos 2015), especially regarding the main trade union confederations, which are the signatory employees' organizations.

More recently, Law 4635/2019 imposed by the right new Democracy government, attempted to reintroduce some of the memoranda terms regarding collective bargaining. Specifically, it restricts the favorability principle (Zisimopoulos 2019: 101), since it

introduces “general” and “temporary” opening clauses. General and temporary opening clauses provide exemption from special terms of the CBAs for employees working in specific enterprises (such as enterprises which face financial issues– in this case, enterprise CBAs precede over the sectoral or occupational ones). The right to extension is also restricted for sectoral CBAs (e.g. in the case of enterprises with financial issues) and it must be also proven that the CBA extension contributes to the competitiveness and employment, in order to be approved by the Minister of Labor. Furthermore, the Law makes the role of “associations of persons” permanent and it restricts the employees’ unilateral right to arbitration services, as the consensus of the employers becomes pivotal for the negotiation processes to be concluded (Kolaiti 2022: 79).

Regarding the collective action and the right to strike, the right for strike is guaranteed by the Constitution<sup>10</sup>. For the strike to be legally declared, there should be a decision by the administrative council of the trade union organization (Trade Union, Federation/Labour Center, Confederation), whose members are elected by the General Assembly of the trade union, on the rule of simple proportionality. Before the official expiry of the memoranda, the SYRIZA-ANEL government passed the Law 4512/2018, which restricted trade unions’ collective action. According to this Law, a trade union can decide for strike only if at least 50% of the members participate, while the precondition set by Law 1264/1982 was the participation of at least 1/3 of members or even less in some cases. In the New Democracy Law 4635/2019, the right to collective action/strike is also partially impeded, through the establishment of the means of electronic voting for trade unions, which turns the collective social subject of trade union members into a group of passive e-voters (Zisimopoulos 2019:101). Under the more recent Law 4703/2020 implemented by the same government, spontaneous protests are prohibited and police is legally enabled to intervene at any cost in case of destruction of property, while serious legal repercussions are foreseen for persons who do not comply (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G., Dermani, V. 2023: 9).

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<sup>10</sup> Greek Constitution, article 23 “on Syndicalist Freedom”. Source: <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/Vouli-ton-Ellinon/To-Politevma/Syntagma/article-23/>

Last but not least, the Law 4808/2021 which brought the most recent changes regarding labour relations and strike actions, follows an aggressive neoliberal logic similar to the previous Laws; inter alia, it legally enables increases in overtime work through the establishment of individual agreements for the extensions of worktime between employer and employee, by circumventing trade union organization or CBA terms, and it additionally enables lock-outs in case of strike action.

### **2.1 The political context**

Historically, the ideological and political formation of trade unions in Greece is connected with the development of the socialist and communist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Athanasiadis 2022: 13). Trade unions maintained close ties with the political parties and the ideological currents that marked Greek society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, related to the changes of the political and social landscape. This strong political relation can explain up to a certain degree the different splits and factions<sup>11</sup> which emerged as a response to various degrees of state interventionism to the trade union movement and delayed its unification process (Kouzis 2007: 324-325).

Starting from the authoritarian regime of Metaxas, the mid-war years were characterized by a corporatist model of strong state intervention in the trade unions, which was intensified later with the Occupation/Civil war events and the subsequent persecution of the Left and communist forces. In the post war years, the trade union organizations which were deemed as communist, were expelled from the Confederation of GSEE and their members faced a series of legal persecutions; on the other hand, organizations which were compliant with the government and the GSEE decisions, were funded by the “Ergatiki Estia” Association and strengthened their power (Athanasiadis 2022: 28). In the 1960s, the movement of the “SEO-115” trade unions which were organized independently of GSEE, was important for the radical revival of the trade union movement (strikes and protest

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<sup>11</sup> During the 1930s, there were three main trade union factions. The official confederation of GSEE controlled by the liberal supporters of Venizelos government, the “Independent Trade Unions” created by the socialists and the “United GSEE” controlled by the communists (Athanasiadis 2022). These three forces were struggling for the unification of the trade union movement, which would eventually happen later, in the post-Junta years. For more, see section 1.1 (historical overview)

events, especially during the “Iouliana” political clash of 1965 between the King and the government of G. Papandreou). The action of trade unions was limited during the Junta period (1967-1974), only to be gradually normalized again under the post-Junta democratic government of PASOK in the 1980s. PASOK government supported the trade unionism in broader public sector (DEKO) and a deep political and economic alignment between DEKO trade unions and the governmental forces of center/social-democracy was formed (Athanasiadis 2022). The phase of democratization for the trade union movement in Greece came eventually in the 1990s, when the Law 1876/1990 abolished the compulsory state arbitration with the creation of OMED and established the formal social dialogue system between state, employers and employees (Aranitou 2013:158). Since then, trade unions chose to adopt a more conservative stance regarding their repertoire of actions, in the process of becoming institutionalized social partners (Vogiatzoglou 2018a).

It is also important to highlight an idiosyncratic historical peculiarity of the Greek trade unions at their internal organizational level, in contrast to the European ones: the political pluralism. Their organizational unity is combined with presence and coexistence, inside the same trade union, of different political factions, closely connected with the official political parties (New Democracy, PASOK, Greek Communist Party, other leftist/maoist/trotskyist parties, and others, depending on trade union). Their function is not exhausted in a simple struggle of ideological currents, but, as Kouzis (2007) points out, they work within each organizational structure with their own rules of organization and operation, maintain an autonomous presence in the trade union elections held with the system of simple proportionality, come down with a relevant separate ballot/combination at the same time, they make decisions on the issues that are of interest and conduct informal negotiation procedures; they essentially function as organized forces within unions. Thus, this characteristic has an impact the true unity of the trade union movement and impedes the development of a trade union culture rooted to the collective autonomy of its members, rather than a strictly politically positioned one, tied with the agenda of a political party (Kouzis 2007). This is also highlighted by the fact that a lot of trade unions members and

leaders previously held higher official positions inside in the political party hierarchy (Kouzis 2007: 335).

Regarding more specifically the ties between the confederations and the political parties, the political hegemony in the main Confederation of GSEE has remained stable in the last years, with the center/social-democratic faction of PASOK (PASKE) followed by the DAKE (New Democracy) holding the majority of seats in the Administrative Board (Bithymitris and Kotsonopoulos 2018: 115). As for the Communist Party, it has created since 1999 its own coalition of trade unions, PAME, in order to express the interests of the working class in a more combative way (see section 1.1.) Vogiatzoglou (2018a:125) notes: “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.”

Since the mid-1990s, the Greek trade union movement is marked by a new phenomenon, the emergence of grassroots trade unionism in various industries, such as telecommunications, catering, private schools, courier companies and publishing houses (Vogiatzoglou Kretsos 2015: 227). At the core of their philosophy, these grassroots trade unions try to address the issue of the neoliberal transformation of labor relations and organize the new social subject of work in post-fordism, the precarious and flexible worker, who is not adequately represented in the traditional trade unions (Vogiatzoglou 2018). A first independent coordination of the grassroots, rank and file trade unions was formulated in 2009 after the attack of the migrant female worker Konstantina Kouneva (“Syntonismos Protovathmion Somation” – Primary Unions’ Coordination).

Grassroots trade unions usually have a more militant profile, given that they stand critical of the conservative and pacifying stance of GSEE, especially to the governmental policies of

the memoranda. Political pluralism exists inside them, similarly to the mainstream trade unions, and many of their members are affiliated with the anarchist movement and minor anticapitalist political organizations. SYN (later SYRIZA) also used to hold some influence in grassroots trade unions in the early 2000s, launching initiatives such as the SYRIZA's Network of Trade Unionists and the Independent Initiative (Αυτόνομη Πρωτοβουλία), but the party's young cadres' priorities were directed mostly to the support of the new social movements, such as environment and anti-war struggles, rather than trade unionism (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou 2013). Grassroots trade unions' relation to PAME trade union front of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) is also ambivalent, since they do not strictly follow the Leninist tradition of the bolshevik model that KKE endorses (when it comes to Party-trade union relations). The full spectrum of their agenda and actions, as well as their overall contribution to the rejuvenation of the trade union movement in the post-pandemic era, are yet to be fully investigated and assessed, given that their forces remain quite fragmented. Only in Athens and Thessaloniki, they spatially differentiate themselves from GSEE/ADEDY and PAME forces when a strike action is called, by organizing their own separate protests (in Hafteia square and Kamara square respectively).

### ***2.3. The challenges faced by the Greek trade unionism in recent years***

As already discussed in Chapter 1, the Greek trade union movement experiences a big retreat in recent years, expressed both in terms of declining trade union density/trade union membership and collective bargaining coverage. Amongst the main social, institutional, and political factors that contribute to the loss of trade union power for the collective bargaining process, are: the flexibilization of labour relations since the 1990s (Vogiatzoglou 2018a), the mass lay offs, the rise of atypical/undeclared work and the rise of unemployment-especially after the Memoranda period- (Kouzis 2016), the unfavorable legal framework that undermines collective bargaining at a sectoral level and deregulates collective agreements (Koukiadaki and Kokkinou 2016), as well as trade unions' collective action, and the globalization of economy which enables companies to move out of the country in search of lower labor costs. On top of that, the financial autonomy of trade unions is limited, as most of them relied on the state for funding through the "Ergatiki

Estia” Association -until its suspension by the Memoranda in 2012- or EU funds, and the practice of trade union membership/financial subscription is not very well established, especially in the private sector (Mpithymitris and Kotsonopoulos 2018, Kouzis 2007).

As Katsoridas (2021) points out, at a discursive level, another important factor is the loss of legitimacy for the main trade union Confederations: workers lack trust in them, due to the employers’ anti-trade unionist stance and the increasing labor insecurity which limit their collective actions, but also due to phenomena of bureaucratization, intensive factionalism and “trade union paternalism” which have weakened the internal democracy, autonomy and radical potential of the trade unions since the 1990s. Vogiatzoglou (2018a:125) notes: “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”.

Moreover, according to Bithymitris and Kotsonopoulos (2018), the Confederations and their leadership did not adequately respond to the negative transformation of labor relations in Greece after the memoranda; instead, under a rather conservative political hegemony, they got confined in an institutionalized framework, followed a consensual strategic to government and capital and lost capacity for elevating the labor struggles: two important examples is the absence of GSEE and the sectoral Federation in the big strike events in the Iron and Steel Industry (2011-2012) and its open call for the vote of “yes” in the July 2015 referendum, which would determine Greece’s compliance with the National Adjustment Programme imposed by Troika. Lastly, Greek trade unions seem to lack an international scope and a network of international trade unions alliances.

Even if the grassroots trade unions who operate beyond the structures of mainstream trade unionism seem to engage in a more innovative and militant way in emancipatory politics, they face equal challenges, related to their minimal institutional affiliation which translates to limited bargaining power and to their restricted capacity for nation-wide



sectoral intervention actions, since they are scattered to different workplaces and operate mostly inside them (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015: 232). As for the rest of the experimental informal initiatives launched by SMOs and grassroots trade unions (Workers' Clubs, cooperatives, etc), the lack of formal legal recognition poses significant problems for their long-lasting survival and their marginalization to the limits of the productive system (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015: 232).

Despite the negative and challenging landscape for the Greek trade union movement, a revival in unionizing process and labour struggles has started to take place in the last two years, bearing traces of more combative characteristics and rejuvenating trends. Examples of those trade union practices will be further elaborated in the last section.

## **2. Trade Union Strategies**

### ***3.1 Organisational strategies in attracting members***

Throughout the history of the Greek trade union movement, workers' ideological and political affiliation/position has been crucial for joining a trade union. Workers who were members of political parties, especially of those related to the Left, were encouraged to participate in trade unions. Moreover, industrial actions such as strikes and mass protests over economic-political demands were an important part of the trade union strategy in attracting members; in the 1970s, the development of Greek industry and the big increase of the working class in the secondary sector, led to massive strike actions by the side of the industrial workers against the intensification of labor conditions, fueling the creation of many trade unions in big factories. However, the shrinking of the industrial sector and the development of the public and semi-public one in the following years, affected the characteristics of the trade union movement in terms of density per sector (Bithymitris and Kotsonopoulos 2018:108). As a result, from the 1980s till today, there's a big asymmetry of trade union membership between the public and private sector, as already discussed in section 1.2. This fact is both related to the strong alignment of public sector syndicates with the government of PASOK in the 1980s, as well as to the diachronically more favorable

conditions of employment in the public sector than in the private one. Unionising in the private services sector remains particularly low (Vogiatzoglou 2018a).

In recent years, the structural problem of the big decline in trade union membership is connected with the decline in industrial actions and strikes, especially after 2013, and it goes hand in hand with the massive under-representation of females, youth, (undocumented) migrant workers and employees with a temporary, part-time or precarious work status in the main confederations and the confederal unions (Vogiatzoglou 2018, Zisimopoulos et al 2017). GSEE in particular has not launched any unionising campaigns in recent years (Kretsos 2011 cited in Vogiatzoglou 2018a:125)

On the other hand, grassroots trade unions adopt a broader spectrum of actions, towards a more both militant and direct-democratic/horizontal direction, in order to mobilise workers (Vogiatzoglou 2018b). At the level of social mobilization, the primary and grassroots trade unions usually seek support from networks of alliances and often build coalitions on the street with social movement organizations (SMOs), student organizations or informal workers'/unemployed collectives, carrying anti-war, anti-populist, anti-racist and feminist characteristics. Most of them have an active digital social media presence, they employ informational methods such as picketing and diffusion of material inside the workplace and they often organize campaigns and social events for funding purposes. The pandemic impact on their membership rate and social/political strategies needs to be further explored.

### ***3.2. Strategies in collective bargaining process***

Historically, industrial actions, such as strikes, protests and work stoppages, have been important for the workers' struggles in the collective bargaining process. As discussed earlier, the scope of action for trade unions was limited during the Memoranda and the recently-imposed new legislative framework of the right-wing New Democracy government poses significant challenges for sectoral bargaining. In addition, the existence of multiple trade unions and federations in the same sector, including the grassroots ones, with

different political hegemony and agenda, often renders difficult the unification of forces for cross-sectoral mobilizations related to bargaining process.

Grassroots and primary trade unions usually rely on broader social mobilization events, prolonged strike actions, networks of political support and participation in mass protests, in order to make themselves visible and express their demand for sectoral, enterprise or occupational CBAs. Their success in this process of trade union renewal is yet to be fully estimated, but recent struggles, such in the case of delivery platform drivers in 2021, show a hopeful future path. Equally, communist trade unions of PAME resort to the party's organizational capacity in order to mobilize forces and exert pressure, usually in alliance with other trade unions and federations participating in the front.

The mainstream trade unions and confederations affiliated with GSEE-ADEDY adopt the “social partnership” model and usually rely on lobbying negotiations with the employers’ organizations from the “top”, while being unable to successfully renew their repertoire under the new conditions, as it has been noted by scholars (Vogiatzoglou 2018a, Bithryminis and Kotsonopoulos 2018). They usually resort to the 24h general strike, the “stick” in the hands of trade unions, which can be called by a simple decision of the GSEE leadership. Nevertheless, even if the 24h strike is a broadly-used tool for mainstream trade unionism until nowadays, the limited performance it bears in terms of protest participation and its predictability, turns it more into an industrial action of symbolic character than into an effective means of collective bargaining pressure (Vogiatzoglou 2018a, Vogiatzoglou 2018b).

### **3. Trade unions, civil society and social movements**

#### ***4.1. Relationships between trade unions, civil society organizations and social movements: ties and contradictions over the years***

Until the early 1970s, the Greek trade union movement had to confront the repeated state interventions and the disciplinary measures imposed by the anticommunist, post-civil war governments, as already discussed earlier. As a result, trade unions faced difficulties in formulating alliances with broader social movements. Nevertheless, during the late years

of the Military Junta (1967-1974), the labor movement experienced a new revival; strike actions were organized in many sectors by different trade unions and Federations, initially with economic demands (salary increases, etc.), but over the years they became more politicized, demanding the abolition of the Junta regime<sup>12</sup>. Under the influence of mass labour struggles initiated by trade unions, but also under the influence of the 1960s youth movements and the 1968 riots in France, the student movement erupted with demands of democratization, resulting in the Athens Polytechnic Uprising of November 1973 against the Junta regime. Until nowadays, the date of the Uprising (17/11) holds a crucial symbolic role for the labour movement in Greece, as it signifies the protection of the university asylum against police forces and the state. In every big city, mass mobilizations, including protests, university occupations by student organizations and strikes, are organized every year on this date, with the support of trade unions, Federations and Confederations, as well as grassroots trade unions and social movement organizations (SMOs) affiliated with the radical left. University is seen as a sacred place invested with heavy political significance for the history of the post-Junta Greece and it has been chosen as site of protest in many instances, such as for the hunger strike of 300 immigrants in 2011 demanding renewal of papers and legalisation (Rozakou 2018: 190-191).

At the start of the democratization phase in the late 1970s-early 1980s, trade unions retained a class-oriented identity, as highlighted by the big number of industrial actions, such as strikes, led by the industrial workers' movement in big factories (Bithimytris and Kotsonopoulos 2018). Throughout the 1980s until the 1990s, as the democratization processes proceeded and trade unionism in public sector increased, trade unions started to become more financially dependent on state funding. However, the democratization made them more visible to the society; connections and coalitions started to formulate between different social and occupational groups, such as the self-employed and the agricultural workers (Bithimytris and Kotsonopoulos 2018: 112). After the 1990s, the institutional power that trade unions gained through the new regulatory framework, gave rise to a heavy interconnection between first-class trade union leaders and center-right bourgeois

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<sup>12</sup> Athens Polytechnic Uprising of 1973: the influence of the labor movement.  
<https://www.rizospastis.gr/story.do?id=7693844>

political parties as a strategy for collective bargaining, at the expense of adopting more inclusive and mobilizing strategies for the precarious workforce (migrant, youth workers) which was steadily increasing (Kretsos and Vogiatzoglou 2015: 224)

As a result, the 2000s were marked by important changes in the trade union landscape, characterized by the emergence of new industrial actors (grassroots trade unions and collectives) aimed at bridging the workers' representational gap that the bureaucratic inertia of mainstream trade unionism had caused. The official trade union confederations held weak ties with other societal actors and movements, as explained earlier. The December 2008 riots in Athens after the killing of Grigoropoulos were one of the first series of broad social mobilizations which were not directly initiated by trade unions in the early 2000s<sup>13</sup>. During the massive protests that were organized in big Greek cities, the GSEE headquarters were occupied by protesters, as a symbolic action of criticism against the institutionalization and the bureaucratization of the trade union movement and the inability of confederal unions to represent precarious workers. Sparked by the 2008 riots, intensive unionizing processes started taking place among the precarious workers. Different rank and file unions and grassroots entities, operating at company and sector level, some of which were active from the early 2000s as already mentioned, started coordinating on a bigger scale. Those grassroots unions were politically opposed (albeit to a divergent degree) to the Confederation and tried to organized beyond it: "beyond" as defined by both defiance of its strategies on the street and in the same time, participation with representatives in its structures, in order to secure representativeness in the collective bargaining system in each productive sector (Vogiatzoglou 2018b: 8).

At the early years of the Memoranda period (2010-2013), a big anti-austerity protest cycle began. Trade unions were the main vehicles behind the anti-austerity protests, calling for general strikes in big urban centers strikes which gathered tens of thousands of protesters, such as the Syntagma square in Athens (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G.,

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<sup>13</sup> As Vogiatzoglou (2018a: 125) notes: "Throughout this period [1993-2010], 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).

Dermani, V. 2018). In this context, in 2011, the Indignant Citizens' Movement (*Αγανακτισμένοι*) emerged and it resulted in the occupation of public spaces, such as the Syntagma Square in Athens. The Indignants, represented mostly by citizens' organizations, held a populist profile, without a specific political or trade unionist affiliation.

Official trade unions, despite their great contribution to the anti-austerity strikes and industrial actions and their proven capacities in larger coalition building in 2010-2012, remained segregated, up to a certain degree, in the following years. Nevertheless, there were some notable exceptions, such as in the case of regional ecological movements, especially in Northern Greece before 2015. The gold mining activities in Skouries area, Halkidiki, which were proven detrimental for the water pollution in the area, were persistently fought for many years by local activists and citizens' organizations, joined often by student organizations and SMOs; the enterprise trade unions of the gold miners had been in the forefront of this struggle against the company plans<sup>14</sup>, supported by the Trade Union Center of Halkidiki.

Throughout the anti-austerity protest cycle, grassroots trade unions attempted to set their own divergent agenda of actions and employed broader tactics of coalition building, through coordinating bodies and open assemblies with other social organizations. Their mobilizations and strike calls were often supported by left wing political parties, social movement organizations and NGOs in some cases. Certain grassroots trade unions, such as the Waiters' and Chefs' Primary Trade Union, also organized solidarity acts (strike soup actions) for the impoverished and marginalized social groups (Vogiatzoglou 2018b:8).

Additionally, during the same years, a large set of initiatives were launched by SMOs (social movement organizations), left-wing parties, grassroots trade unions and other social actors/workers' collectives; some of those initiatives which are worth mentioning are the Workers' Clubs (*Εργατικές Λέσχες*), the occupied factories, the social solidarity actions and the cooperatives. For Vogiatzoglou (2018b), these initiatives can be described as

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.athensvoice.gr/archive/35771/diamartyria-ton-somateion-metalleion-kassandras-gia/>

“experimental laboratories” of the Greek trade union movement. As he highlights (2018b: 10), “the interesting characteristic of the [experimental laboratories] is that, instead of debating whether one or the other trade union activity is more suitable to the emergency situation in which the Greek society has been found, they seem to re-negotiate as a whole the content of trade unionism – questioning, for example, self-evident notions such as the workplace or the power relations inside it, as well as proposing radical transformations of the workers’ organization format and content”.

Workers’ Clubs sprang in various neighborhoods in Athens during the 2010-2015 protest cycles after initiatives by various leftist and anticapitalist organizations, as a complementary structure to workers’ organization outside the workplace at a regional-neighborhood level. Many of them are active until today and organize social and political activities addressed to unemployed workers living in the neighborhood, migrants and workers of small local companies, who are hard to get reached through the path of official trade unionism. As for the occupied factories, the most prime example is the VIOME factory in Thessaloniki. VIOME used to be an industrial adhesive factory unit. When management declared bankruptcy and stopped paying the wages in 2012, workers organized a general assembly and decide to seize full control over the production on the basis of a horizontal, direct-democratic cooperative structure. Until today, VIOME organizes festivals and political events supported by international workers’ cooperatives, as well as SMOs, student organizations and primary trade unions. Lastly, the social solidarity initiatives and the cooperatives (groceries, pharmacies, shelters and squats) emerged as a response to the “humanitarian” impact of the austerity and the demise of the welfare state (Vogiatzoglou 2018b: 11).

The immense social effect of the 2015 Mediterranean refugee crisis brought various responses of mobilization by different actors, NGOs, trade unions, collectives and open initiatives of solidarity (*ανοιχτές πρωτοβουλίες αλληλεγγύης*). Historically, mainstream trade unions held weak ties with the undocumented migrants workers and therefore, they faced difficulty in formulating connections with migrant and refugee groups after 2015. In



the pre-crisis framework, as Rozakou (2017) highlights in her anthropological study of a volunteer organization in Athens, the notion of civil society in Greece was closely tied with the idea of modernization in the context of the European integration of the state and often made part of the political agenda of mainstream political parties in the context of EU directives. She notes, however, that “bottom up” practices concerning civil society, such as grassroots volunteerism, are often related with the construction of a new sociality unfolding between the person and the state; this type of sociality is associated with an “activist” collective identity, since “bottom-up” volunteer action is often targeted to the support of marginalized social groups and differentiates from “charity” (Rozakou 2017). Since 2015, drawing from this pre-crisis background of solidarity activism, many SMOs, grassroots trade unions and informal collectives tried to reach out migrants and refugees in detention camps and provide solidarity services, such as food and goods for primary needs. Rozakou (2018:199) refers to the pluralistic social and political subject behind those initiatives as “solidarians”, emphasizing the egalitarian, anti-hierarchical sociality that they attempt to construct with immigrants, in contrast with the bureaucratic frameworks imposed by state and the NGO vocabulary that frames refugees as “clients receiving services”.

The aforementioned solidarity initiatives culminated to the creation of the Coordination for Refugees/Migrants around 2016-2017 (*Συντονισμός για το Προσφυγικό-Μεταναστευτικό, ΣΥΠΡΟΜΕ*), with participation of primary trade unions, student organizations, SMOs, which aim was to politicize the struggle around immigrant/refugee rights and fight against the migration governance regime imposed by the Greek state and EU, resulting in detention camps and illegal pushbacks in the borders, as well as to forge class solidarity ties between Greek and immigrant workers/refugees<sup>15</sup>. A grassroots union was also created for the organization of the workers’ struggles in NGOs<sup>16</sup>. In addition to SYPROME, many anarchist

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<sup>15</sup> <http://sypro.me.blogspot.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://svemko.espivblogs.net/> “We are workers, not volunteers!”. In 2021, an additional sectoral trade union especially for workers in associations/NGOs dealing with the humanitarian/refugee crisis, based in Thessaloniki, was created.

<http://ergasianet.gr/2022/02/12/%CF%83%CF%89%CE%BC%CE%B5%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF-%CE%BD%CE%B5%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%8D%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%BF->

squats in the center of Athens and Thessaloniki previously functioned as informal hosting centers for refugees, before being evacuated by the police forces in recent years<sup>17</sup>. Mainstream trade unions were heavily absent in this broad spectrum of solidarity practices and political struggle instances for immigrant rights<sup>18</sup>.

Another important case of convergence among different social actors and trade unions were the Collectives' Coordinations in Athens, Thessaloniki and Volos (*Συντονισμοί Συλλογικοτήτων*). Collectives' Coordinations were horizontal coordinating bodies of grassroots trade unions (especially in secondary education), student organizations, neighborhood collectives and other SMOs, which tried to organize solidarity struggles at a regional or local level centering around the social impact of austerity (electricity and water reconnections, stoppage of household auctions, etc.). Their role was quite prominent in the ongoing movement against the auctions of households by banks due to private housing debts<sup>19</sup>, with many of its members still facing legal persecutions<sup>20</sup>.

Communist and grassroots trade unions, anarchist collectives, political parties and social movement organizations also participate in the annual antifascist protests every September against the killing of rapper Pavlos Fyssas in 2013 by members of the neo-Nazi organization of Golden Dawn. The struggle against the rise of far-right in Greek society during the crisis, and the demands for the official delegitimization of Golden Dawn party<sup>21</sup>, which was held responsible for attacks on migrants, unionist members of the Communist Party and activists, represents an important point of unification of the Greek labour

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<https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/900250/ekkenothikan-i-vila-zografoy-kai-ktirio-stin-alkiviadoy-poy-teloysan-y-po-katalipsi-epta-syllipseis/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/900250/ekkenothikan-i-vila-zografoy-kai-ktirio-stin-alkiviadoy-poy-teloysan-y-po-katalipsi-epta-syllipseis/>

<sup>18</sup> In 2017 only, GSEE organized a donation of 500 heaters for the refugees in detention centers, funded by the Greek Petroleum Company (ΕΛΠΕ). In its campaign leaflet, any particular mention of the politics involved in the refugee crisis and the political positioning of the Greek labour movement, is absent. <https://gsee.gr/deltio-typou-emprakti-allilengyi-gia/>

<sup>19</sup> The protection of primary house residence became a major political issue in 2016 under the changes introduced to Katseli Law. For an ethnography of the changing moral stances around private housing debt in the context of the Greek crisis, see Kofti 2021.

<sup>20</sup> <https://syntonysyllogthes.blogspot.com/>

<sup>21</sup> By decision of the Greek court, the leaders of Golden Dawn faced charges of running a criminal organization and were condemned to prison sentence in 2020.

movement with the anarchist/antifascist political collectives and the broader social movement for social rights. The threat of far-right ideology rising amongst dispossessed working-class members and trade unionists was prevalent during the austerity years (Mpithymitris and Spyridakis 2020). Golden Dawn made several attempts to penetrate inside the labour movement and increase its appeal to workers, especially in the case of Perama shipbuilding workers. The role of the communist Trade Union of Metal Workers of Attica and the Shipbuilding Industry of Greece was particularly important in this process. It defeated Golden Dawn's efforts to establish a nationalist "only for Greeks" labour association in the port zone of Piraeus, by building coalitions with antifascist collectives and other trade unions (Mpithymitris and Spyridakis 2020).

#### ***4.2. Important mobilizations in industrial actions in the last three decades***

From 1990s to early 2000s, trade unions gained institutional power through the legal framework of the Law 1876/1990 and made use of the positive bargaining conditions. As a result, cross-sectoral industrial actions of long duration were scarce during those years, in contrast with the 1970s-1980s (Vogiatzoglou 2018a: 125). There were however, some notable exceptions, such as the big strikes initiated by GSEE and trade unions against the pension system reform introduced by the government of PASOK in 2001, which eventually achieved the withdrawal of the bill. Multi-day strikes were also organized in other sectors, such the teachers' strike in 1998, strikes of bank employees, municipality workers and university faculty (Vogiatzoglou 2018a: 125). It should be noted as well that GSEE-ADEDY organized 24h or 48h general strikes until 2010, usually on the date of the state budget voting (e.g. 2005 strike, 2008 strike against the pension reform). The 24h/48h general strike was established as a means of pressure and struggle by the trade unions in this period; even if it was initially effective and granted political power to trade unions, over the years it ended up being a predictable tool of industrial action. The Confederations did not make any particular efforts to renew their arsenal in order to halt the structural declining trend and to organize mass-scale and long-lasting mobilizations, especially after 2013.

The start of Memoranda sparked a wave of strike activities against the implementation of the austerity measures. The anti-austerity protest cycle, initiated by the strikes which trade unions called, can be split into two sub-cycles of industrial action activity, from 2010 to 2012 and from 2013 to 2015. The first cycle of industrial actions from 2010 to 2012 was characterized by a radical repertoire, such as violent protests, occupations and safeguarding of factory units, and the participation in strike events reached almost 56% (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G., Dermani, V. 2018: 23). This percentage dropped in the next to years, reaching 37,8% in 2015. During the second cycle of industrial actions from 2013 to 2015, the percentage of multi-day industrial actions was on a significant demise. Most of the protest events noted during those years concerned sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations, while the strikes lasting over 24h dropped from 30% in 2010-2012 to 15% in 2013-2015 for the public sector, and from 40% to 20% for the private sector, according to a relevant study conducted by INE-GSEE (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G., Dermani, V. 2018: 23-24). This retreat of radical mobilizations is partially attributed to the SYRIZA's pre-electoral appeal to workers and trade unions alike; workers would allocate hopes to the institutional power of SYRIZA which was on the rise, with the promise that if the party became government, the labor conditions would improve (Papanikolopoulos 2018).

As the scholars of the same study by INE-GSEE highlight, the claims of the 2010-2015 strikes had mostly a defensive character against the deregulation of labour relations caused by the Memoranda policies (such as claims against the mass lay-offs/wage and benefit cuts/privatizations, demands concerning the application of CBA terms, etc.) (ibid. 23-24). In the context of those strike cycles, primary and grassroots trade unions launched their own separate strike calls from the Confederation, through the Coordination of Primary Unions, and managed to gather a large number of protesters. During the demonstrations of 2010-2012, GSEE leaders frequently became the target of intense criticism by grassroots trade unionists (Vogiatzoglou 2018b: 6).

Despite the huge participation of workers involved, the anti-austerity strikes and protest events did not manage overall to adequately curb the detrimental effects of the memoranda policies for the world of labor in Greece, nor did they grant any additional bargaining power for the trade union forces (Vogiatzoglou 2018b), due to the persistence of internal problems and contradictions of strategies inside the trade union movement, as explained in previous chapters.

From 2015 to 2019, there's an overall declining trend in industrial actions initiated by trade unions, when compared to the early 2010s. However, in 2016, a new rise in strike activity is noted, this time against the pension reform introduced by the Law 4387/2016 under the Minister of Labour G. Katrougkalos of SYRIZA-ANEL government. In 2017 respectively, trade unions' demands became part of a more radical agenda, focusing on salary increases, support of public and state-owned enterprises and employment of more permanent staff; major initiators of those events were the trade unions of hospital doctors, the trade unions in Media and Press and trade unions in the broader public sector POE-OTA (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G., Dermani, V. 2018:25). In 2018 and 2019, a moderate number of demonstrations was noted, inferior to previous years. However, important was the struggle of the trade unions in secondary public education against the "evaluation" bill («προσοντολόγιο»), which, by flexibly restructuring the system of educational qualifications required for employment in public education, increases competitiveness on the basis of a market-oriented "hunt" for degrees. Trade unionists organized protests to the Ministry of Education and sit-ins, which were often joined by student unions and organizations.

Despite the structural decline and the objective challenges that Covid-19 posed in 2020-2021, unionizing processes and labour struggles seem to experience a considerable resurgence in the last two years. New trade unions were created in a series of sectors which have been especially precarious lately and the conclusion of a CBA by trade unions (in at least two cases) was made possible after protest campaigns and strikes. Scholars have noted that efforts towards practices of "radical political unionism/social movement unionism" carried out by certain primary trade unions in the last years (including the

initiatives by communist and grassroots trade unions in the austerity years, as analysed in the previous section) bears hopes for the whole rejuvenation of the Greek trade union strategies and successful collective bargaining (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G., Dermeni, V. 2023). This phenomenon is worth exploring further through meticulous analysis of specific trade union case studies, as it can reveal the new dynamics of collective action and the possibilities arising for the reversal of the negative equilibrium of forces between labour and capital. Selective instances of those practices, based on the criteria of participation and capacity of successful mobilization in different sectors, will be presented in the next and final section.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was particularly challenging for trade unions to organize industrial actions. However, communist and grassroots trade unions, as well as SMOs, held a critical position to the unilateral implementation of governmental policies regarding the lockdown and the socio-economic effects of their pandemic. In their announcements, they scrutinized the threat of unemployment, the increased state surveillance and -usually violent- police intervention, which heavily restricted syndicalist and social freedoms, as well as the absence of protection measures for the workers in many industrial sectors. In April 2020, national campaigns and street demonstrations were organized by trade unions in healthcare and public hospitals, supported by trade unions and federations in other sectors. The protests of healthcare workers were the first instance of public demonstration organized during the active lockdown period. The protesters were demanding better working conditions and permanent staff hiring, protection measures and adequate medical equipment for the hospitals and increase of state funding of the healthcare system<sup>22</sup>. The mobilizations were later followed by a set of dispersed collective actions, such as sit ins, partial work stoppages and campaign days, backed up by trade unions in other industries,

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<sup>22</sup> Leaflet of the PAME (Communist Party) coalition of trade unions related to mobilizations that took place during the first period of pandemic.

<https://pamehellas.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/%CE%88%CE%BD%CF%84%CF%85%CF%80%CE%BF-%CE%A0%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B4%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%AF%CE%B1%CF%82-%CE%A3%CE%B5%CF%80%CF%84%CE%AD%CE%BC%CE%B2%CF%81%CE%B7%CF%82.pdf>

such as in telecommunications services and supermarkets, as well as by grassroots trade unions and informal workers' collectives.

As for the industrial and maritime logistics sector, an upsurge of mobilizations and strikes has been noted since 2020. In early 2020, workers in the Nickel Industrial Unit of LARKO went on a long-lasting struggle, characterized by demonstrations to Ministerial buildings and strikes of mass participation, against the government's plan to shut down the industry. The communist trade unions in the Mining Industry had been on the leadership of the struggle, with main demands the continuation of the state funding for the LARKO industrial unit and the protection of all employees against lay offs and temporary work caused by the imminent privatization<sup>23</sup>. In 2021, the deathly accident of an employee on shift in the Cargo zone of Piraeus port, owned by COSCO, sparked a series of 48h strikes by ENEDEP, the trade union of Cargo workers in Piraeus. The strike activity, albeit declared illegal by the government and violently suppressed by police forces, was particularly militant; many trade unions in other sectors stood in solidarity with the cargo workers, who successfully exerted pressure on the subsidiary of COSCO to deploy safety measures in the workplace, make all employees' contracts permanent and sign a CBA with the trade union. Last but not least, in September 2022, the management of "Malamatina" factory in Thessaloniki announced lay-offs; the factory trade union responded with consecutive strikes<sup>24</sup>, which were fought both by police forces and management through anti-strike mechanisms (e.g. the creation of a management-friendly trade union). Nevertheless, the strikes were supported by many trade unions from Northern Greece and the workers also started an ongoing legal struggle against the tactics of the management.

Furthermore, one of the major social mobilizations that marked the first lockdown period of Covid-19 was the initiative of art workers in April/May 2020, called "Support Art Workers", which brought together 25.000 art workers from different disciplines across Greece, in order to address the invisibility of the labor relations in the art industry and the

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.rizospastis.gr/story.do?id=10973820>

<sup>24</sup> Demands of the Malamatina workers. <https://info-war.gr/malamatina-oi-theseis-ton-apergon-kai-t/>



insufficient state support provided to art workers.<sup>25</sup> “Support Art Workers” was initiated by trade unions in the arts (SEI – Greek Actors’ Trade Union, and other grassroots unions) , as well as by different social organizations and collectives in the art sector. The movement held an active social media presence, launched digital campaigns of support, organized protests, festivals and symbolic actions in the big urban centers, with main demands the establishment of a 535 euros monthly financial benefit to all suspended workers in the industry.

“Support art workers” left a significant legacy for the organization of the artists’ struggles at a sectoral level, as the increased strike activity in the sector during the early months of 2023 would prove. This time, art workers organized massive strike mobilizations, street protests and occupation of theaters, as part of their struggle against the presidential decree 85/2022 introduced by New Democracy government, which downgrades their educational qualifications and sets in danger the bargaining power of the employees in the sector<sup>26</sup>. The protests and strikes, which lasted until early April 2023, were initiated by trade unions and workers’ collectives in the art sector, and they were massively supported by school and university student organizations, and political organizations.

Additionally, the educational sector became the forefront of mass mobilizations and strikes in recent years, starting from 2019. The public education system, both at secondary and university level, has been a battlefield of reforms and neoliberal policies implemented by the last governments, which were exemplified under Minister of Education Niki Kerameos’s bills in 2020-2021 for the external evaluation scheme applied to teachers, the establishment of university police corps and the restructuring of the entry system to higher

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<sup>25</sup> According to “Support Art Workers”, many art workers in different sectors were excluded from the state support of 800 euros provided to almost 1.4 million suspended workers during the pandemic.

<https://www.supportartworkers.org/en/respect-art-workers-%cf%80%cf%81%ce%bf%cf%82-%ce%ad%ce%bd%ce%b1%ce%bd-%ce%ba%cf%8e%ce%b4%ce%b9%ce%ba%ce%b1-%ce%b4%ce%b5%ce%bf%ce%bd%cf%84%ce%bf%ce%bb%ce%bf%ce%b3%ce%af%ce%b1%cf%82-%ce%b3%ce%b9%ce%b1/>

<sup>26</sup> Announcement of the Greek Actors’ Union (SEI) for the decree 85/2022.

<https://sei.gr/2022/12/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CF%83%CE%B7-%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%85-%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%B7-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%BF-%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%B5%CE%B4%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%BF-%CE%B4%CE%B9/>

education. ADEDY, trade unions of teachers and professors, joined by student organizations, called for strikes and organized big demonstrations and marching protests to the Ministry. It is important to note at this point, that in 2021 a researchers' trade union in higher education institutions was created (SERETE), aiming to render visible the precarious employment conditions that many young researchers face due to lack of university funding; mobilizing a lot of forces through social media, SERETE organized for the first time a national strike in March 2022 (Katsoridas, D., Papanikolopoulos, D., Kollias, G., Dermani, V. 2023: 76-77)

To conclude, in June 2021, when "Hatzidaki" bill was introduced by New Democracy, which unfavorably restructured labour relations (see section 2.1.), a series of protest events and strikes against the implementation of the bill were organized by many trade unions, including the Confederations of GSEE-ADEDY, and left political parties. In the negative context that "Hatzidaki" Law eventually brought for collective trade union action - especially in the private sector-, the struggles of delivery riders in the E-food and Wolt platforms are exceptionally interesting, since they boosted unionizing activities centered around the wage relation and bargaining power in a particularly precarious industry of the digital economy. It's worth mentioning that before the e-food delivery drivers struggle, a grassroots occupational trade union of delivery drivers (SVEOD) was already making efforts to organize the workers in the sector and address the issue of precarious and dangerous working conditions, by setting up committees in different companies, including E-food, and by calling a 24h strike in 2020.

Since its creation, E-food employed both permanent contracted employees and temporary freelancers (under 3-month contracts). In September 2021, the company attempted to lay off 115 employees, asking them to become freelancers in order to continue working for the platform. Workers' response was immediate; in collaboration with SVEOD, the sectoral Trade Union in Tourism and Food industry, as well as with the eventual support of the sectoral Federation, e-food workers organized work stoppages and moto-protests in five big Greek cities and in late September, a 24h strike was declared. Under the consecutive pressure by workers and trade unionists, along with the boycott actions launched by

consumers in social media, the company was forced to recall the decision and it proceeded into turning all freelancer contracts into permanent ones, for around 2000 workers<sup>27</sup>. A militant enterprise union of e-food delivery drivers was also created in November 2021 with branches in both Athens and Thessaloniki, which recently (2023) started negotiations for an enterprise CBA<sup>28</sup>. In April 2023, flexible workers of Wolt delivery platform also went on 3-day strike asking for permanent employment contracts when the company declared payment cuts per order<sup>29</sup>, which was supported by the trade unionists of e-food company and the sectoral Union.

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<sup>27</sup> In 2022 and 2023, the company made again efforts to reintroduce the flexible “freelancer” regime, starting from the employees working in 4h shifts. <https://efood-union.gr/2022/06/05/%ce%b1%ce%bd%cf%84%ce%b9%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b5%ce%ba%ce%bf%ce%bc%ce%b1%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b5-%cf%83%cf%84%ce%b9%cf%83-%cf%80%ce%bf%ce%bb%ce%b9%cf%84%ce%b9%ce%ba%ce%b5%cf%83-%cf%84%ce%b7%cf%83-efood-%cf%80/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://efood-union.gr/2023/07/20/1%ce%b7-%ce%b4%ce%b9%ce%b1%cf%80%cf%81%ce%b1%ce%b3%ce%bc%ce%b1%cf%84%ce%b5%cf%85%cf%84%ce%b9%ce%ba%ce%ae-%cf%83%cf%85%ce%bd%ce%ac%ce%bd%cf%84%ce%b7%cf%83%ce%b7-%ce%b3%ce%b9%ce%b1-%cf%84%ce%b7%ce%bd/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.news247.gr/koinonia/wolt-apergoyn-oi-dianomeis-mechri-ti-deytera-enantia-sti-meiosi-ton-amoivon-toys-ta-aitimata-toys.9992643.html>

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