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The responses of trade unions to the youth unemployment crisis in Greece

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The present article presents the responses of the Greek trade unions to the rise of youth unemployment in Greece after the outbreak of the economic crisis. The main objective of the paper is to depict the problems that young Greeks are facing and the ways that unions are responding to those problems. The austerity measures implemented in Greece, together with the severe deterioration of the employment prospects of young workers, constitute the focal points of this overview. The analysis focuses on how the trade unions in Greece have responded to the austerity measures and what ideological elements inform their positions and strategies.

Key words: Greece, youth unemployment, trade unions, economic crisis

Introduction

The outbreak of the economic crisis in 2009 has hit young people hard around the world. The severity of the crisis and its continuing effects on working people has been evident in the growing number of unemployed and poor people around the world, and in the European Union, in particular. Despite the fact that the crisis has caused the deterioration of the employment prospects of the working age people around Europe, there are some age cohorts and some specific countries which have been affected more than others. In most European countries, young people (16-25 years old), in particular, have been severely hit by the economic crisis and the lack of employment growth. The effect of the crisis on the current and long-term employment prospects of this age cohort has been widely discussed in academic literature (Bell/Blanchflower 2011). At the same time, there are some European countries such as Greece which have been affected more by the economic crisis and subsequently unemployment, and youth unemployment rates have increased more than in other countries. The burgeoning fiscal deficits in Greece, together with the economic recession, have left the country in a state of unprecedented social, economic and humanitarian turmoil. The implementation of austerity measures, along with labour market reforms, has dismantled the labour market and welfare institutions which provided some degree of social safety and job protection to the popular masses. Even though the crisis and the austerity measures have caused an overall deterioration of the living standards and employment prospects of the Greek population, there are some age groups, such as young people, whose employment prospects have deteriorated even more. This specific age cohort suffered high unemployment and limited employment prospects even before the crisis, however, family support and job creation in some sectors kept youth unemployment from ever reaching 'crisis' levels. However, after the crisis the excess of the youth unemployment rates and the absence of employment growth have led to a massive crisis of youth unemployment, as almost half of young Greeks are unemployed (Eurostat 2012). At the same time, the labour market reforms in combination with other economic policies, including tax increases, have rendered the youth labour market very flexible and cheap, but the cost of living unaffordable. In addition, the traditional security net mechanisms for young people such as family networks have been

severely undermined by the economic crisis, and as a consequence, youth unemployment has become a much more serious problem.

This paper explores the responses of Greek trade unions to youth unemployment and the neoliberal youth employment policies implemented in Greece after the outbreak of the economic crisis. The main objective of the paper is to investigate how trade unions have responded to the youth employment policies implemented in Greece in light of the Memorandum Agreements as well as the discourses produced by those unions. Specifically, this paper seeks to comprehend the Greek trade unions' discourses and gauge their affiliation or opposition to the central features of the neoliberal discourse as manifested in the recent youth employment policies of the Greek government. Finally, our research investigates whether Greek trade unions have adopted a conflict or cooperation strategy in their relations with the other social actors. The rest of this paper has the following structure: the first section sets the Greek economic and employment context within which the Greek trade unions responses are prompted and developed. The second section explores the Greek economic and employment outlook during the crisis. The third section presents the main neoliberal policies implemented in Greece after the outbreak of the economic crisis in relation to youth employment. The fourth section is the methodology section of the research. The fifth section presents the main research findings of the paper and the sixth section concludes.

Greek economic and employment outlook before the crisis

The Greek economy has not always been at the bottom of the capitalist pyramid, as is the case nowadays. Despite its location in the periphery of the European Union, Greek economic growth was more akin to the trajectory of the core European countries and had less in common with the success stories of the other periphery countries such as Ireland (Schmidt 2010). The Greek economy experienced an economic downturn in 1970s and 1980s which was superseded by the economic recovery of the 1990s and 2000s (Maniatis 2005). The economic recovery was reflected in the high growth rates and the strong productivity growth (Mitsopoulos/Pelagidis 2009).

The success of the Greek economy in 1990s and 2000s has been attributed to several factors. According to many commentators, the strong presence of Greek capital in the Balkan region signified profound momentum for the Greek capitalism as it boosted the development and profitability of the Greek economy. Furthermore, the huge inflow of immigrants offered cheap labour and flexible employment relations to Greek companies, contributing to the acceleration of economic growth (Mavroudeas 2010:12). Furthermore, the organization of the Olympic Games affected the trajectory of the Greek economy as many infrastructure activities and investments were undertaken during this period (Mitsopoulos/Pelagidis 2009). Mitsopoulos and Pelagidis contend that the lack of competitiveness of the Greek economy against its European partners was partly counterbalanced by wage stagnation and very long working hours (Mitsopoluos and Pelagidis 2009). However, the negative impact of wage stagnation on the economy was, in part, overcome by the expansion of consumer spending, which was mainly based on financing (credit), tax cuts, tax evasion and household borrowing (Schmidt 2010; Lapavitsas *et al.* 2010). The growth of Greek financial and industrial capital was aggrandized by public policies, which actively encouraged capital accumulation through public works, business subsidies and tax evasion (Katsimi/Moutsos 2010).

The trajectory of the Greek economy from 2000-2008 stimulated an improvement of the employment indicators. Over a period of ten years (1998-2008), the employment performance of the Greek economy could be characterized as positive, as more jobs were generated and less people were out of work. Over the same period, the Greek labour market was characterized mainly by high rates of self-employment, low-levels of part-time employment, low female participation in the labour market, significantly high levels of informal economy and low employment rates among tertiary graduates (Karamessini 2008: 520). In terms of the sectoral composition of the employment growth, the public sector, construction, retail and

services had seen significant job growth over the same period (National Statistical Service of Greece). However, the growth of the Greek economy was not accompanied by a parallel employment growth, as many new labour market entrants and immigrants were left out of the labour market (Karamessini 2008). Although youth employment indicators have improved slightly since 2000, the persistence of youth unemployment and the inability of the Greek labour market to offer employment opportunities for a large bulk of educated young people were the permanent characteristics of that period. Compared with the youth employment in other OECD countries, Greece seems to comprise an 'exceptional case' in terms of the low participation of its young people in the labour market (OECD, Jobs for Youth: Greece 2010: 51).

Greek economic and employment outlook during the crisis

The outbreak of the global economic recession in combination with structural-domestic characteristics has brought about a paramount crisis in the Greek economy. The two most severe manifestations of that crisis are the sovereign debt crisis and the stagnation of the real economy. The revelation that the real budget deficit stood at 12.9 per cent of GDP in 2009, as opposed to the 6 per cent that successive Greek governments had presented, in combination with high external debts, led to a severe deterioration of the financial credibility of the Greek state. In addition, the continuation of borrowing cheap credit was not any longer a viable option for Greece as the global financial crisis had worsened the business environment and had considerably reduced the liquidity of financial institutions (Mavroudeas 2010). The financial position of the Greek state was further undermined by the drop in public revenues which fell by 1.1 billion Euros in 2009. The inability of the Greek state to satisfy the macroeconomic and fiscal criteria set by the EMU effectuated widespread speculation regarding the fate of the Greek debt crisis, including the likely possibility of the government defaulting on its debts. After a long period of speculation, negotiations and reluctance by certain European governments, in May 2010 Greece received a 110 billion Euro bailout package on the premise that extensive austerity measures and tough economic reforms will be implemented in order to reduce the public deficit (Mahmud 2010). So far, the Greek government has implemented a series of austerity measures which include: wage and pension cuts, a steep rise in VAT and a program of privatizations. The second manifestation of the Greek crisis, the economic recession, has been well-documented with the decline of economic growth, unprecedented unemployment rates and the severe imbalance of trade accounts. Although all sectors of the Greek economy have been hit by the recession, the available data indicate that the industrial, construction and retail sectors have had the largest losses.

The severity of the economic crisis and the adverse effects of the debt crisis of the Greek state have driven the Greek labour market into a sharp and unprecedented decline. Available data for the period after the crisis, 2008-2011, illustrate that unemployment rates have starkly increased for all the age groups and the prospects for employment growth have been minimized. The same data indicate that youth unemployment in Greece has continued to increase, rendering youth unemployment an enormous problem with dramatic implications, as almost half of the Greek young people are jobless. Several academic analyses and reports point out that the employment prospects for young people are extremely bleak and that the current sharp increase in unemployment has spread out across all educational and skills levels (OECD 2010). Furthermore, the reduction of the minimum wage for 16-25 years old and the lack of welfare assistance for young people, in combination with the constraints that the current crisis imposes on the traditional networks of financial support (family), is further aggravating the position of young people in Greece.

Greek youth labour market policies in the period after the crisis

In order to understand the positions and discourse of Greek social actors, a brief outline of the main features of the neoliberal Greek labour market policies is required. Regarding young workers under 25 years old, the Memorandum of Understanding between GREECE, EC, ECB and IMF (Law 3845/2010, 3863/2010 & 3846/2010) predicts the reduction of minimum wages by 16 and 30 per cent for those under 25 and 15-18 (apprenticeship scheme), respectively. The law 3845/2010 envisages the introduction of stage agreements for registered unemployed young persons (up to 24 years of age), according to which their wage will correspond to 80 per cent of the national minimum wage and the employers' social contributions will be covered by the OAED. The same law promotes the implementation of an active labour market policy framework through which unemployment benefits are converted into 'reintegration vouchers', paid as a subsidy to a potential employer.

In 2009, the Greek government initiated a number of sector-specific training programs to a total cost of 230 million Euros, dedicated to the upgrading of the learning abilities and work experience of young unemployed workers in certain sectors of the economy, such as construction and green jobs. Furthermore, in 2009, the Greek government further extended the conversion of unemployment benefits into subsidized employment by providing subsidies to Greek SME for hiring unemployed less than 30 years of age. The specific measure includes full or partial coverage of the social security contributions of the employers by the unemployment benefits of the unemployed (OECD, Jobs for Youth: Greece: 161).

In 2009, a new initiative for youth employment was introduced with the title 'the special program for the promotion of youth employment', which attempted primarily to improve the employment prospects of unemployed youths between the ages of 18 and 30, with upper secondary qualification in small businesses (OECD, Jobs for Youth: Greece: 13). According to the principles of the specific program, its duration is 21 months and during this period the state provides employers with a certain sum-subsidy which amounts almost to 25 per cent of the Greek average wage (OECD, Jobs for Youth: Greece: 163). Furthermore, in 2009 another program for youth unemployed called 'A start, an Opportunity' was introduced for assisting large numbers of youth unemployed with low qualifications and limited work experience to enter the labour market. The programme has a total cost of 160 million Euros and its objective is to attract 40,000 young people. The program focuses on unemployed youth living outside the regions of Attica and Thessaloniki and its structure included three main options: acquisition of experience (public or private sector for five months), training in basic computer skills (100-hour training programme) and integrated counseling action (job-search skills) (OECD, Jobs for Youth: Greece: 164).

In addition, new labour market policies are being implemented through which a whole new employment and social landscape is being shaped. The new measures do not target a specific age group and young workers are therefore being equally affected. These policies include the promotion of firm-level agreements and territorial pacts whose wage setting deviate from the sectoral agreements, reductions of severance payments by 50 per cent, the increase of collective dismissals, reductions in over-time compensation and the extension of the probation period from two months to one year. The downgrading of the supremacy of the national or sectoral agreements over firm-level agreements, and the subsequent promotion of the later, are central features of the flexible labour market policies introduced by the Greek government. The very latest developments in the Greek debt crisis indicate that a further across-the-board wage reduction of twenty-two per cent and the abolition of collective agreements have been agreed upon by Greece and its lenders (Hellenic National Reform Programme 2011-2014, 2012: 18-19). The reduction of minimum wage under the national minimum wage will particularly affect young people, as their wages will be cut by an additional ten per cent due to their age. Furthermore, according to the latest act of legislation, the reduction of minimum wages for young people will have a direct effect before the expiration of the existing national or sectoral agreements, not afterwards, as the law predicts for the other age groups. Therefore, the law discriminates against young people not only in

terms of the reduction of the minimum wage but also in terms of the speed at which the new legislation will be implemented regarding that age cohort. These basic dimensions of the Greek labour market reforms are important in understanding the complex and drastically changing employment environment within which the youth employment debates are located and developed. Due to the practical abolition of collective and sectoral agreements, and the reduction of minimum wage by 30% below the national minimum wage, many young workers will see a dramatic drop in their income, to the tune of 40 to 60%.

Methods

The need to find causal explanations and mechanisms behind observable phenomena, in this case youth employment discourses, directs our methodological choice towards qualitative methods. The aim is to explain why actors choose specific discourses and whether/why these debates differ between countries. The exploration of these phenomena requires a deep knowledge of their choices, events and processes (Collier, Brady and Seawright 2004). Furthermore, qualitative research methods include an understanding of the perspectives and interactions among different stakeholders and therefore facilitate the fulfilment of the research objectives of the current study (Sofaer 1999: 1106). These are issues which can be properly addressed by qualitative research methods, due to the rich descriptions and deep knowledge of events acquired by these methods (Sofaer 1999: 1102). In this research, qualitative research methods were primarily utilized for examining the youth employment discourses in Greece and Ireland. The exploration of these discourses and the reason behind certain political choices and discourses can be streamlined through a more detailed investigation of the research subjects.

Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary source of data. Conducting interviews by using a semi-structured form enables researchers to draw rich accounts and deeper understandings of interviewees on the research topic (Becker and Bryman 2004: 268). A total of eight interviews were conducted with trade union representatives from the Irish Trade Union Congress (ICTU), the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), and the Workers Militant Front (PAME). In addition, a collection of documents, reports, newspapers articles, press releases, statements and leader's speeches were all employed as sources of information regarding unions responses. The findings were analysed using the qualitative software programme Nvivo.

Flexibilization of the labour market structure

The results of our study demonstrate that trade unions in Greece are divided into two main political/ideological camps, namely social-democratic and communist. This division is manifested more explicitly in their position on the main problems of the Greek economy and the explanations and solutions to those problems both in the pre-crisis and post crisis periods. The first position expressed by the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) contended that the main problem of the Greek economy originated from limited investments in education, innovation and growth projects (GSEE, Ετήσια Έκθεση 2011: Η ελληνική οικονομία και η απασχόληση 2011). Furthermore, the fact that the Greek economy was characterized by low employment growth and high unemployment rates was primarily the result of an economic model based on low-wages, public subsidies and low investments in high technologies. In this model, the first priority was immediate profitability by any means without high-quality production, employment growth and innovation. Specifically, the reports and analyses of GSEE highlight the need for a restructuring of the economy through public investments, utilization of the workforce and education, rejecting the dominance of the market and the greed for unlimited profits (GSEE, Ετήσια Έκθεση 2011: Η ελληνική οικονομία και η

απασχόληση 2011). According to the GSEE, this model could boost the competitiveness of the Greek economy through upgrading the productive and economic basis and producing high quality services and products. Furthermore, the policies intended to restructure the economic and productive basis will have to be structured around the needs and potentials of the Greek economy and society.

The second position was expressed by the Communist-backed trade Union (PAME) and carried an explicit anti-capitalism and class-struggle discourse and policy strategy. In contrast to the social-democratic orientation of GSEE, the PAME discourse focuses explicitly on the class nature of the capitalist system and the exploitation and inequalities which are inherent elements of that system. In relation to the realities of the Greek employment relations, PAME not only criticizes the excessive violation of workers' rights and the establishment of a slave-trade regime, but it is also extremely critical of the social-democratic stance adopted by GSEE. Specifically, according to PAME representatives, the social-democratic union supported the flexibilization of the Greek labour market and the deterioration of workers' rights either through their participation in flexible employment arrangements or through their consensual and opportunistic attitudes in relation to the national collective agreements (PAME, Η ΣΤΑΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΓΣΕΕ ΟΣΟ ΑΦΟΡΑ ΤΙΣ ΣΣΕ 2012). Also, the communist party-backed trade union is of the view that the compromises agreed upon by the General Confederation of Trade unions can only serve to undermine and eventually eliminate employee's rights. PAME has declared its opposition to the strategies adopted by GSEE for overcoming the economic crisis, accusing them of betraying the working class movement and supporting the capitalist classes (PAME mobilization: Rise up, Push aside the bureaucrats of the ETUC 2012). In relation to the proposals set by the General Confederation for a new growth model based on green growth and innovation, the respondents from PAME argued that those green corporations will be operating under capitalist rules and therefore they will still seek to increase their profits by exploiting people.

The discourse developed by trade unionists indicates a strong opposition to labour market flexibility on the grounds that flexibility is already high and employees' security and protection have been seriously damaged by the recent labour market reforms. Furthermore, the lack of social protection for the unemployed was highlighted as one of the reasons why any proposals regarding flexibilization of the labour market cannot be sustainable in the Greek society. According to respondents of the Research Institute (INE) of GSEE, the view that the Greek labour market is characterized by rigidities and low flexibility is more an ideological position used by the large employers organization (SEV) and less a pragmatic view based on the realities of the Greek labour market. In addition, the view expressed by GSEE was that the labour market reforms introduced after the economic crisis have erased all employees' protection and security and have led to an extreme flexibilization of the labour market. In the words of the youth secretary of GSEE, 'Labour market is so flexible that every discussion for further flexibilization is a joke. Laws for temporary employment, part-time agency employment have already passed'.

Although the post-crisis labour market reforms brought about a strong trade unionist discourse against labour market flexibility, trade unions had already addressed the negative consequences of labour market flexibility before the outbreak of the crisis. In his speech at the International Youth Camp, the secretary of the Youth of GSEE stressed that the labour market reforms implemented in Greece liberalize even further the already very flexible youth labour market, aimed at reducing labour costs (International Youth CAMP, 2009: 7). In the same speech, he states that young people have been unfairly treated in relation to wages, as the majority of them belong to the low-paid wage scale (International Youth CAMP 2009: 3). According to a respondent from INE (Research institute of GSEE), the Greek labour market was a 'middle Ages employment regime' in which workers had very limited or no social and employment rights and employers were freely left to define the employment conditions without any state intervention and control. The extreme flexibilization of the Greek labour market in combination with the lack of social security structures for the unemployed was the

main reason that the trade union ridiculed the idea of youth unemployment being caused by rigidities and high protection.

Reduction of minimum wage

With regards to the reduction of the minimum wage for those under 25 years old, trade unions were unanimously against this measure. All trade union respondents argued that the reduction of minimum wages for young people is an act which violates the Greek constitution, as the latter stipulates that all workers should receive at least the minimum wage. In a recent report on the new labour market reforms, GSEE perceives the new legislation as discriminating against young people and a practical violation of the fourth article of the Constitution according to which all Greek people have the same rights (Circular No. 1 2012: 8). In the same report, the reduction of minimum wages and the liberalization of the labour market for young workers is considered as an ineffective way to reduce unemployment since its implementation has not led to any reduction of youth unemployment (Circular No. 1 2012: 8).

However, despite the official disagreement of the Greek trade unions with this measure, our field work discerned the existence of two dominant trade union tendencies in relation to the reduction of the minimum wage. The first perspective expressed by PAME and some GSEE-supported trade unions claims that the reduction of minimum wages for young employees creates a modern slave-trade regime and facilitates their exploitation and humiliation. Specifically, according to PAME, the severe violation of employment and social rights and the reduction of wages under poverty levels are signs of impoverishment and wretchedness for the young working people (PAME, Announcement of Youth Secretariat 2010).

The second tendency expressed by the Secretary of Youth of GSEE rejects the measure as a real threat to young people, but it recognizes that the damage will be less severe as the state will cover the remaining of the minimum wage. Furthermore, the director of INE recognized the fact that some measures help the integration of young unemployed into the labour market and therefore their mere rejection is not always a straightforward action. The same respondent pointed out that the majority of trade union members have accepted the fact that in current conditions, the lowering of the national minimum wage and the violation of sectoral agreements through employment programs facilitates the integration of some unemployed people into the labour market and therefore is not a purely negative development.

The relation between skills and labour market needs

The relation between skills and labour market needs has sparked a controversy between Greek social partners. A majority of Greece's main trade union representatives argue that youth unemployment is not the cause of the deviation between young people's qualifications and labour market needs. In fact, according to the Greek trade union, youth unemployment is the result of the very limited capacity of the Greek economy and businesses to absorb the highly skilled Greek youth workforce. Based on this assumption, trade union officials point out that the Greek youth labour market is characterized by high-skilled young workforce whose qualifications are too high and specialized for the limited needs of Greek businesses. Some respondents were very critical of the fact that although employers complain about the lack of qualifications, they never specify the qualifications that they would prefer (Respondent by INE/GSEE). In addition, one respondent rejected the supply-side explanation of unemployment by arguing that the phenomenon of emigration would not have emerged if young Greeks were not skilled enough (Respondent by INE/GSEE). Recent education reforms also sparked strong opposition by some trade unionists as the assumptions and ideas which those policies rest upon were criticized for their vague and unrealistic nature. One example of this tendency was the view of one member of the INE (GSEE) who pointed out that the

educational reforms introduced by the Minister were destined to fail since it is unclear ‘which kind of markets the new departments are going to correspond to’ (Respondent by INE/GSEE). However, the GSEE's secretary of youth correlated high youth unemployment with the lack of correspondence between skills and labour market needs, arguing that ‘first, many young people were obtaining qualifications and when they went into the labour market, their qualifications did not correspond with the labour market’s needs’.

Flexicurity

Although flexicurity’s popularity was low among trade unions, a certain degree of ambiguity and division was observed in relation to that concept. As the Director of the GSEE's Research Institute explained, there are two main tendencies within GSEE in relation to flexicurity: the first tendency supports the idea that Greek employment and social conditions deter the application of such a policy idea. Many respondents argued that the high flexibility in the labour market and the absence of any kind of social protection or security prevent the realization of flexicurity since the security side is completely neglected and underdeveloped in Greece. As the secretary of the Youth division of GSEE put it: ‘In order to make flexicurity work, you should first have security, which does not exist in Greece, and then you should look at flexibility’. Thus, since the flexicurity discourse is based on the idea of a trade-off between security and flexibility, the absence of security prevents trade unions from seeing the relevance and practical applicability of flexicurity in the Greek context.

The second tendency supports the notion that flexicurity could be applied in the Greek context. This stream argues that since flexibility is already very high in the Greek labour market, trade unions can exchange more flexibility in the labour market for more security. For the supporters of the second tendency, flexicurity is an appropriate policy tool for securing the employment and social rights of employees in the very negative context of the economic crisis. According to the Director of INE/GSEE, flexicurity in the Greek context means that trade unions engage in a trade-off between wage-cuts and jobs by offering the reduction of employee’s wages for a period of time, in exchange of preserving their jobs. This particular argument was also put forth by the President of GSEE who argued that he was not against the idea of accepting wage cuts and changes in the working conditions set by the National collective Agreement if that was necessary to save existing jobs (Interview on Greek Radio). The final tendency in relation to flexicurity was expressed by PAME. In contrast to the responses of GSEE’ trade unionists, PAME respondents stressed that flexicurity is just an ideological tool utilized by capitalists in order to even further liberalize the labour market. In their view, the applicability of flexicurity is not plausible, not because of the institutional features of the Greek labour market, but rather because of the antagonistic and irreconcilable interests between capitalists and workers.

Active labour market policies

As was already mentioned in earlier sections, employment and training programs constitute an important pillar of the active labour market policies which have been implemented in Greece over the recent years. The active labour market interventions continue to be a part of the youth employment programs which have been implemented in Greece since the outbreak of the economic crisis. These interventions usually include training and in-work programs through which young people can enter the labour market or enhance their skills through their participation in training sessions. A predominant type of such an intervention is the coverage of the employers’ social contributions by OAED or the conversion of the unemployment benefits into subsidies-incentives for businesses to hire unemployed people. The recent legislation has launched a series of employment programs which target the integration of young people into the labour market through the subsidizing the wages or employers social

contributions. In other cases, the deviation of wages from the national collective agreements has been introduced as part of employment programs (programmata koinofelous ergasias) introduced under the active labour market policy interventions.

The specific policies have divided the academic and political debates, whereas some perceive it as a positive step towards facilitating the integration of young people into the labour market. For others, this specific policy is a tool for offering cheap labour to businesses. Although a clear-cut ideological taxonomy of the specific policy is not straightforward, the reduction of wage and no wage costs is an indispensable political demand of neoliberal thinking and political practise. Therefore, with the danger of oversimplification, we will assume that the social forces which support those measures are closer to the neoliberal employment and social policy prescriptions.

For employees, employment and training programs were not a straightforward matter, as a variety of positions was taken within GSEE. The most dominant position held by trade unionists is that ALMPs are a positive development for maintaining and generating employment but the lack of control and security jeopardize employees' rights. It seems that the outbreak of the crisis has influenced the positions of GSEE, as the Director of INE admitted. As a result of the crisis, GSEE supports any measure which helps unemployed people to be integrated into the labour market, even if the objectives and methods of those measures are problematic. A more explicit position was taken by the GSEE's Secretary of Youth, who pointed out that these programs are a positive policy initiative through which business are given incentives to invest and increase employment growth. However, the same respondent recognized that the government should improve these programs and assure that they enhance young people's qualifications and employment prospects.

On the other hand, PAME has strongly opposed all the active labour market policies introduced by the Greek governments over the years and has accused GSEE of betraying working class people by accepting those measures. In particular, according to PAME, the employment and training programs constitute a strategy of the capitalist class to reduce the value of labour power and dismantle the social and working rights of the Greek working people. PAME's strategy against those measures is clearly depicted by its stance during the last round of the social dialogue where PAME members interrupted the social dialogue and accused GSEE of selling workers' rights off by accepting to negotiate the non-wage cost which is an inherent part of workers social welfare (pensions, health care).

Conflict and cooperation in the trade union's positions

This section demonstrates the dominant tendencies of the relations between the social partners and assess whether conflict or consensus elements dominate those relations. Our results show that the relations between the Greek social partners were not stable and concrete, as the perceptions of different actors within the same organization and the impact of the economic crisis led to an interplay between conflict and agreement. One group of trade unionists from GSEE highlighted the high level of cooperation, communication and understanding between employers and employees and the common views held in relation to many issues. One respondent said that the relations between social partners are really good and this is clearly reflected in the common attempt made by employers and trade unions to preserve the 13 and 14 wages and sign a new collective agreement. The same respondent however acknowledges the fact that differences still remain but the social partner's environment is in general positive and cooperative.

One factor which reinforces the strength of the above statement is the criticisms which have been generated with regards to the positive relations between the trade union and the employers' organizations. A group of respondents from INE stressed that the relations between the union and the employers have been conspicuously good considering the enormity of the recent attacks on employee's rights. These respondents argue that the economic and labour market policies implemented since 2009 have completely dismantled the social and

employment systems in Greece, but the responses of Greece's main trade unions have not been at the levels of conflict and resistance required by the situation. Despite these criticisms, the same respondents were reluctant to openly accuse the leadership of the trade union for this stance and they focused their explanations more on the limited density of the Greek labour movement and the limited power of trade unions in relation to employers.

The existence of a strong communist backed trade union in Greece has important repercussions in relation to the direction of the youth employment discourse. The strong impact of that Union and its anti-capitalistic political agenda contributes significantly to the production of conflictual elements in the youth employment debate. Specifically, whereas the trade union leadership adopted a consensus-based youth employment discourse where cooperation, dialogue and understanding were the most dominant characteristics, respondents from PAME produced a predominantly conflict-driven youth debate characterized by radical ideological elements and proposals for resistance. The anti-capitalist nature of PAME and its strong opposition to the social democracy discourse produced by GSEE is one of the most characteristic features of trade unionism in the Greek case. As was mentioned earlier, the essence of their dispute lies in the fundamental distinction between the demand for a more anthropocentric type of capitalism proposed by GSEE and the radical overthrow of the capitalist system advocated by the communist party-backed trade union.

Furthermore, the interplay between conflict and cooperation produced in the GSEE discourse is mainly due to the multi-ideological composition of the Union and its affiliation with different political forces. Thus, whereas the respondents affiliated with the ruling party (Socialist Party) indicated a more consensual and cooperative spirit, the respondents affiliated with the Left Party produced a more conflict-driven discourse. In addition, the interplay between conflict and consensus has possibly been derived from the fact that although the main trade union has adopted 'a consensus collective agreement strategy and social dialogue practices', its leaders recognize that the current economic and employment uncertainties experienced by young Greek people prohibit a purely consensus policy and necessitate the adoption of some acts of resistance (GSEE calls on rally against the measures 2012).

However, our findings indicate that the economic crisis and the implementation of austerity measures have affected the relations between Greek social partners and rearranged the conflict-cooperation balance. In particular, the post-crisis period has been stigmatized by the emergence of a more conflict oriented discourse where the interests of the social partners seem to be on different trajectories. Whereas the pre-crisis period was a period of coexistence and common ground, many respondents from GSEE recognize the change in the relations between the social partners after the crisis and openly accuse the SEV of adopting a neoliberal agenda. As the secretary of youth in GSEE argues, 'SEV is of the opinion that they have found a chance to completely liberalize the labour market. They want to liberalize at the institutional level as well because, in reality, there is flexibility in the labour market but they want it to be legal-institutional too'. In a very recent interview, the President of GSEE highlighted the positive relations between the Greek social partners and the paramount value of the social dialogue as a tool for common understanding and cooperation (Statement by the President of GSEE after the Social Dialogue).

Conclusion

The paper has shown how the Greek trade unions have responded to the employment policies and what ideological elements derive from their positions. As was mentioned in the main parts of this research, the two unions analysed in this paper have adopted diverse positions in almost all the themes of youth unemployment. It was also shown that the two organizations have embraced different strategies regarding their relation with other social actors (employers' organizations). On the one hand, the dominant GSEE position was that the social dialogue is a useful tool for promoting workers' rights and reaching fruitful agreements with employers within the negative context set by the economic crisis. Although GSEE has

expressed its opposition to the austerity measures through industrial actions relations, there is a clear indication that collaboration and compromise have been the prevalent characteristics. On the other hand, PAME has denounced its opposition to any class collaboration on the ground that these procedures undermine worker's rights and dismantle the class-orientation of the labour movement.

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