

New Research in
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Reuben-
Shemia

**Trade Unions in Greece
between Crisis and
Revitalization:**

Rebuilding Workers' Power from
Below?

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Trade Unions in Greece between Crisis and Revitalization:

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List of Abbreviations

ADEDY	Supreme Administration of Unions of Public Sector Workers
BOPU	Book and Paper Union
DAKE	Trade Union Faction close to conservative party Nea Dimokratia
EC	European Commission
ECB	European Central Bank
GSEE	General Confederation of Labor
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IKA	Social Security Center
ILO	International Labor Organization
INE	Research Institute of Employment of GSEE and ADEDY
KEPEA	Center of Information of Workers and Unemployed
KKE	Communist Party of Greece
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
OEE	Organization of Labor Centers (Ergatiki Estia)
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAME	All-Workers' Militant Front (Network of Trade Unions close to KKE)
PASOK (PASKE)	Social-Democratic Party (and its respective union faction)
PRA	Power Resource Approach
RPU	Radical Political Unionism
SYRIZA	Coalition of the Radical Left (Party)
Vio.Me	Occupied factory of Viomichaniki Metalleftiki in Thessaloniki

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Abstract

Long before the economic crisis in Greece, its labor movement had been already in a crisis itself. Indicators of the crisis of trade unions are seen in low union density in the private sector, lack of union representation at the workplace level and the representation gap considering young, female, immigrant and precarious workers. The trade union bureaucracy is dominated by public sector unions and led by party-factions. Inner cohesion of the labor movement is shattered by the organizational divisions of public and private sector workers, and the political fragmentation of the leadership at all levels mainly along party lines. Due to a union bureaucracy characterized by financial dependence on the state and a lack of autonomy from governmental or parliamentary parties, attempts to strategically rebuild trade unionism in the name of unity and effectiveness are not initiated from the top.

The central question of this paper concerns the ways in which unionists try to overcome the identified deficiencies of the labor bureaucracy. This issue is examined with the analytical guidance of the theoretical framework of the Power Resource Approach developed in Trade Union Revitalization Studies and content analysis of expert interviews in Greek for original data production. The used framework helps assessing the various forms of power of trade unions, including organizational, institutional, structural and societal power. In this way, their strengths and weaknesses can be identified and potential as well as applied strategies can be better understood.

Active shop-floor unionists seem to be the driving force of labor renewal in Greece, as they set autonomous and self-organized initiatives in motion with the pronounced objective of overcoming long-lasting deficiencies of unionism. Some democratize their unions, others even abolish the system of leadership by political parties. Some revitalize their unions through intervention in the leadership via militant factions, while others establish completely new autonomous unions organized in a federative manner. With these measures, they try to build structures and mobilize agency that will enhance the capacity and the willingness of workers to act, to participate and to develop power in their respective location in the market, as actors in society and as organization. Finally, they all try to coordinate and to organize struggles independently from the overall trade union bureaucracy, in order to achieve more cohesion, autonomy and thus effectiveness in their actions.

Preface

The main part of the research for this paper was conducted during 2013, and submitted in a longer version as a M.A. final thesis in early 2014. Certainly, during the period between fieldwork and publication many things happened in Greece, which can only be briefly outlined here without a claim to be complete.

Regarding the economic situation - or more precisely deterioration - of the country, it is noteworthy that the austerity measures did not lead to a reduction, but instead to an increase of indebtedness¹. By the end of 2015, at least 150,000 public sector workers had been dismissed, while unit labor costs were reduced by 15% via labor market reforms (Boukalas/Müller, 2015: 394). Wage increases are outlawed until unemployment decreases to under 10% - an unattainable criterion considering the Greek context. Moreover, arbitration should not be only based on legal frameworks, but must now provide for general circumstances in the economy (ibid.). While the duration of collective agreements has been reduced to only three years, the tendency of declining existing agreements, already observable during my research, eventually continued in the same direction during the subsequent three years. Before the crisis in 2008 there were 161 collective agreements in the private sector, covering almost all workers in this area. Six years later, in 2014, only eleven of such agreements (above the firm level) were left with coverage of only 7-10% of the workforce, while agreements on company level increased by around 75% during the same period. Collective agreements now stipulate wage reductions, despite their former role (Kennedy, 2016: 11).

The political arena also witnessed important developments. In January 2015, Syriza, a broad left-wing-coalition that was formed just some years before, was elected in government, as voters hoped for a reversal of austerity, a major debt cut while simultaneously staying in the European Union (EU). As divisive discord continued between the new government and the Troika regarding reductions of pensions, a prosecution of the labor market reform and the extent to which revenues should exceed expenditures (before debt service), the prime minister Alexis Tsipras decided that on July 5 of the same year the Greek people should hold a referendum concerning the next memorandum. The result was the famous 'OXI' (No), as the new bailout deal was rejected by a majority of 61%. Notwithstanding, Syriza returned to negotiations with a proposition not essentially changed compared to the one the Greek people had previously repudiated. Predictably, the

¹ According to the European Commission, while in 2010 the debt-to-GDP-ratio of Greece stood at 146%, this value increased by 30 percentage points within four years, as in 2014 it stood at 176% (EC, 2015).

counterpart did not embrace this overture. Instead, the creditors “led by Germany, continued to play hardball and on July 12 forced Tsipras to accept an even harsher, almost humiliating, agreement in exchange for a conditional promise to begin negotiations on a third bailout loan” (Boukalas/Müller, 2015: 392). Hence, social movements and trade unions had been effective enough to shift relations of social and political powers within the country, a development that eventually peaked in the victory of Syriza at the elections for government in early 2015. Yet, the government lacked leverage at the EU level in order to transmit the will of the people, to credibly threaten creditors. The option to exit the Eurozone, the so-called 'Grexit', was seen as economically not viable and was thus also politically not volitional among the population. But even if this option would have had a majority, it would eventually not be enough as a bargaining chip, “[g]iven Greece’s small economy and lack of political clout in the European Union” (Boukalas/Müller, 2015: 392).

My estimation, that Syriza would not be able to improve the situation of workers in Greece, was thus confirmed by these recent events. What applied to the US labor movement two decades ago, observed by Bronfenbrenner, might also be applicable to the Greek context today. As quoted in the paper, in both cases trade unions:

“[c]ontinued to seek to be rescued by their political allies, blinded by the belief that organizing renewal was entirely dependent on first achieving significant labor law reforms. In doing so, they failed to understand that the deteriorating legal climate for organizing has been a direct result of their [...] political power. In fact, only through organizing massive numbers of new members in every sector of the economy, will [...] unions once again have the political leverage to ensure more progressive and more effective labor legislation.” (Bronfenbrenner, 2003: 47)

These developments are inconsistent with the prediction of the Power Resource Approach, according to which, a political party allied with labor could – when trade unions are weak (e.g. low unionization rates) – theoretically substitute for the lack of associated power by promoting the interests of workers and trade unions on a meso and macro level by passing respective laws at local or national level (ASU, 2013: 289). Accordingly, this does not hold true in the case of Greece.

Although nowadays I doubt whether Greek trade unions would have been able to halt these developments, if they had a more strategic unionism, I stay with my conclusion, that

labor should not put all hopes into a party, not because parties are per se not reliable, but because a party has also not sufficient power to implement reforms, when its base is not pressuring it. Possibly, this is a generalizable insight, as it draws on century-old experiences and lessons of the labor movement: The workers' movement had only been able to eke out concessions when it was in a position to indeed pressure the respective opponent.

But a stakeholder can only put an opponent under pressure, if it is clear who the opponent is and how pressure could be exerted. And this is what I would assess differently than three years ago. The inner structures regarding political fragmentation, lack of autonomy and of democracy – identified by some researchers and union activists as difficult preconditions for unionism – were not the main problem, but this lack of clarity, of ability to adequately analyze the prospects of change. Not because expertise is missing, but due to the complexity of the situation. Yet, some would probably still argue that, if diverging political party interests would not splinter trade unions so deeply, there would be political will and unity, to use actions not only to show dissatisfaction, but to indeed put under pressure economic, financial and political power centers within the EU.

The question of power of the Greek labor movement is thus related to its ability not to pressure local employers on the ground but the driving forces behind and main beneficiary of the European restructuring project. In the search for who this is, more and more researchers and analysts come to the conclusion that the neoliberal reconstruction in Greece is a “coherent project undertaken by supra-national directorates [...] on behalf of transnational, export-oriented capital”² (Boukalas/Müller, 2015: 394) consisting of a massive depreciation of labor, in order to attract FDI with the overriding objective to serve the interests of financial capital and transnational corporations (Van Apeldoorn, 2013: 199). Why should this interest group initiate steps to take back any previous demands regarding debt-payments, reforms and general economic guidelines of the region if there is no agent capable of challenging it, keeping it from expanding and making profits? In other words, has the Greek labor movement for years been fighting the 'wrong' opponent? Historically, labor had been able to sometimes challenge industrial capital due to the mutual dependency inherent to their relation. The latter cannot make profits without the work of the former. By withdrawing the workforce, corporations can be forced to give in. But where is the dependency relation that would allow for an equivalent challenge with regards to financial capital?

Even if answering this question at the moment seems far-fetched, unionists and researchers should not take the bait to “continue to blame external forces” (Bronfenbrenner,

² While local capital also benefits, it serves mainly as a hub for foreign capital (Boukalas/Müller, 2015: 401).

2003: 47) only for the current inability to halt neoliberalism. The limiting factors may be severe, but they will become even worse while waiting for a better window of opportunity to appear. As trade unions do not have the power to eliminate external factors, the only thing they can do is optimizing what is under their control. And if the current unfavorable situation of workers cannot be improved solely by internal democratization of unions, maybe workers will, by gaining more clarity regarding whom to target and how to really be able to make some gains. Who is actually in a position endowed with necessary powers to issue reversals and changes of economic policies? And how can this target be challenged?

1. Introduction: Grassroots Labor Renewal in Greece

*“Unionism is in a free fall...because old-type unions have nothing to give”*³

The sovereign debt crisis in Greece was used by the so-called Troika⁴ as an opportunity to impose deregulation of labor rights and flexibilization of labor markets via economic adjustment programs, although it is not proved that the crisis was a result of previous labor laws (Clauwaert/Schönmann, 2012: 6). Wages and benefits were significantly reduced, collective and individual redundancies facilitated and the collective bargaining system was drastically restricted (Kapsalis, 2012: 12-13). These reforms thus seriously weakened the position of workers in the industrial relations system.

Greek trade unions however had been in a crisis themselves for long and their power was already in process of decline, even before the attacks on labor (Kapsalis, 2012: 5). One of the main causes of the problems and one of the biggest obstacles to a more strategic unionism, are seen in the leadership of trade union federations and confederations as they are fragmented into factions controlled by political parties (Kapsalis, 2012: 18). In contrast, and eventually also as a result of the lack of renewal from above, more autonomous initiatives to revitalize the trade union movement increasingly emerge from the grassroots level. In this research paper I want to show, *how grassroots trade union activists try to overcome deficiencies of dominant trade unionism in Greece.*

Notwithstanding their contributions to a labor renewal from below, apart from isolated cases, there are no accounts of these strategies in trade union literature. Much of international research on revitalization of trade unions in general focuses on strategies that stem from the leadership of trade union bureaucracies and therefore considers internal restructuring of labor organizations as a necessary pre-requisite for being capable of growing (Bronfenbrenner/ Hickey, 2004: 29). Yet these approaches are not able to explain or capture what is happening in the case of Greece and eventually also in other countries in which the trade union bureaucracy is not willing to make internal changes. Examining these occurrences in more detail would enrich labor revitalization studies with a bottom-up perspective.

³ Interviewed grassroots unionist on problems of the Greek labor movement (II: 378-379).

⁴ Consisting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission.

I will first present the empirical approach and the guiding theoretical framework. Subsequently I will come to the analysis of the status quo of the Greek labor movement by using data from literature and from qualitative interviews, to finally discuss the results.

2. Empirical Approach: Expert Interviews and Analysis

To fill the existing research gap in current labor studies, processes of labor revitalization from below in Greece must be captured by collecting new data and by generating more knowledge on this field. Consequently, the research approach is twofold, as it is based on the literature on Greek unionism complemented by interviews conducted to generate additional missing data. First I will present the methods of data collection, then justify the interviewee selection, to finally illustrate the research question, by also defining some basic terms.

2.1 Data Collection

A prevalent tool of data collection in empirical social research is the expert interview, especially used as an exploratory tool, for systematization of knowledge and/or for generating theory (Bogner/Menz, 2009: 46-47). An expert can be considered a person that has either “contextual knowledge” (ibid: 46) or “a specific kind of specialized knowledge that is not available to the researcher” (ibid: 47). As there are almost no scientific accounts on examples of renewal from below in Greece, it is necessary to find persons with practical knowledge and/or experiences on the theme of my research question in order to gain access to related information. Accordingly, persons with this specific knowledge that is not available to me otherwise, will belong to the target group itself, thus the above operationalized ‘grassroots trade union activists’. Moreover, experts may not only be those with practical experiences in the field, but eventually also those who can provide scientific and theoretical knowledge on the area of research and the guiding question, such as a trade union researcher with expertise on the case of Greece.

While the expert interview can be used for both qualitative and quantitative research (ibid.: 44), I have conducted qualitative interviews as my aim is to generate knowledge and not to test the validity of a certain model. Only after already having some knowledge on different strategies of grassroots renewal would a quantitative approach be suitable, e.g. in order to assess the rate of utilization of certain tactics or their causal relationships to other parameters (e.g. size of the union, number of factions etc.). As an exploratory first step, however, it makes more sense to have open questions, so that interviewees can tell their experiences. Therefore, quantitative methods would not be suitable for my specific research question.

2.2 Interviewee Selection

I conducted four qualitative expert interviews in Greek with unionists and one with a Greek trade union researcher. In the analysis I will use translated fragments of the interviews. All quotes were translated by me. In the following though I will not indicate it every time. The references to the interviews after each quote indicate the number of the interview and the line-number in each transcription.

Interview-ID	Description
I1	Group Interview with grassroots unionists
I2	Spokesman of Vio.Me
I3	Primary School Teacher – Coordination of Unions
I4	Member of Bookworkers' Union
I5	Researcher of INE

The first was a group interview⁵ intended as an exploratory helicopter interview with experts in order to get a first overview on the varieties of actors in the field. The group consisted of grassroots union activists of Thessaloniki in different trade unions of mainly the private sector, except for one public school teacher. The reason I chose a group interview as a first step into the field was to get a broader overview than I would have gotten from only one perspective and to also better grasp the tensions between their different perspectives and approaches. This was indeed the case as the deep clash between those following the approach ‘from within’ and those in favor of the creation of new self-organized structures became clearly observable. This helped me clarify basic structures of the perspectives of my target group. Based on this insight, I conducted the following interviews with a ‘representative’ of each of those two basic opposing ‘camps’ and one with a member of a ‘hybrid’ form of union, combining both approaches. While the first interview was exploratory, the following interviews rather served for the systematization and theorization of knowledge.

As an interlocutor speaking for the autonomously organizing part of the labor movement⁶, I chose a worker of the occupied and self-managed factory Viomichaniki Metaleftiki

⁵ In the analysis, this interview will be referred to as I1.

⁶ In the analysis, this interview will be referred to as I2.

(Vio.Me) in Thessaloniki.⁷ For a great part of the labor and broader social movement, Vio.Me is perhaps the most promising example of recent labor history in Greece, while it is even used as a narrative resource in many other labor struggles.

One of those who prefer to change and improve trade unions from within the existing structures was the primary school teacher I interviewed next.⁸ She is the elected president of the administrative council⁹ of her union representing the faction ‘Autonomous Interventions’ (New Left). As a result of the dissatisfaction with the union structures above the primary level, she has helped establish and is active in a self-organized network of primary level unions of both the public *and* the private sector that coordinates independently from the official federations.

I also interviewed a member of BOPU, the bookworkers’ union in Athens¹⁰, although it had also been examined by Kretsos (2011). The union has achieved to abolish the party faction system – an important aspect that Kretsos refuses to mention. Moreover, the power of the administrative council has been reduced in favor of the general assembly consisting of the entire membership. On the other hand though, it still participates in the overlying federations, for instance, through elections or out of the necessity to sign the collective agreement. Therefore, I have classified it as ‘hybrid’. Yet collective agreements on craft level have been invalidated by the economic adjustment programs. Kretsos though still highlighted this agreement as one of its major achievements, as the research was conducted before these reforms were practically realized (Kretsos, 2011: 275). Therefore, I considered it important to bring the state of research in this case up to date and to examine what has changed for the union since the economic reforms.

In order to find out what these interviewees do differently compared to the dominant form of unionism, in all interviews with practitioners I asked about organizational structures of the respective union in terms of decision-making, about organizing strategies and recent experiences of actions and struggles.

Finally, I also interviewed a scholar working for INE¹¹ the trade union research institute of the national labor confederations. The questions for him differ from those addressing the

⁷ After the owners of the company for construction materials abandoned the factory, a part of the workforce took the decision in the general assembly of the union to occupy the plant and run it themselves. Now they produce cleaning supplies, mainly soaps, and struggle to become legally recognized as a cooperative.

⁸ In the analysis this interview will be referred to as [I3]

⁹ This position is always carried out voluntarily, thus without any form of remuneration. According to her “the opposite happens. We put from our pocket. We are not getting paid” (I3: 679-680).

¹⁰ In the analysis, this interview will be referred to as [I4]

¹¹ In the analysis, this interview will be referred to as [I5]

unionists, as I refer to aspects such as correct estimation of union density, the role of factionalism, social composition of trade union membership and the main problems of unionism from a researchers' perspective. His statements are used as a point of reference for comparison and contrasting of the findings in the other interviews and in the literature. While this interviewee as an academic might not be in possession of additional practical knowledge on new forms of renewal from below, his contributions are nevertheless useful and valuable as an amendment and verification of the literature, and as a critical contextualization of the statements of the unionists. In this way, the tension of contrasting perceptions between academia and practitioners can be illustrated and both can be reciprocally scrutinized in order to ensure the validity and generalizability of the outcomes.

2.3 Research Question and Definition of Terms

With the help of a content analysis of qualitative interviews brought into relation with the theoretical approach and literature on Greek trade unionism, the following research question will be answered. By this means it shall be explained *'how grassroots trade union activists try to overcome deficiencies of dominant trade unionism in Greece'*. By **grassroots trade union activists** I identify active trade union members on the primary level of trade union structures who are not paid staff¹². By active I mean those members who actively participate in assemblies, protests, strikes and other activities of trade unions. All interviewees except for the union researcher belong to this social group. The term **dominant trade unionism** refers to the type of unionism that prevails in Greece. Chapter four will clarify how this looks like. **Deficiencies** of trade unionism are those problems internal to Greek trade unions that can theoretically be influenced and changed by trade unions themselves through their restructuring and re-orientation. With which aspects of dominant trade unionism are grassroots unionists not satisfied? How the actors **'try to overcome'** these deficiencies is the parameter in the research question that captures the renewal strategies from below. How do grassroots unionists address the identified flaws and how do they try to correct them? In what ways do their organizational structures differ from those of the dominant trade union model? What else distinguishes grassroots unions from conventional unions in Greece? In what ways do they think these corrections will increase power of trade unions? These sub-questions can facilitate to capture the undertaking of this research more concretely.

¹² In general on the primary level even unionists with representative status are not paid. However, in order to make the distinction between professional staff (mainly on the secondary and tertiary level) and grassroots activists clear, in the definition I do not refer to 'unionists' but to 'union activists'.

3. The Power Resource Approach: Four Forms of Workers' Power

The Power Resource Approach (PRA) is a theoretical model and a heuristic tool with which the dynamics of weakening and strengthening of trade unions can be analyzed by examining elements of structure and agency together with a special focus on the latter (ASU, 2013: 312).

It examines four dimensions of trade union or workers' power (structural, associated, institutional and societal) and capabilities related to combinations of them (learning aptitude, organizational flexibility, capability for conflict, framing and protection of autonomy)¹³.

Structural Power is related to the position of workers within the economic system (Silver, 2005: 30) and it is based on the disruptive power of limiting or even shutting down production, capital accumulation (Piven, 2008; cited in ASU, 2013: 284) or the circulation of goods and services (ibid.: 285). A subform of structural power is '*Market Power*', which results from a tight labor market, possession of scarce qualifications demanded by employers and the ability to retreat from the labor market due to alternative sources of income (Silver, 2005: 14). This implies that besides the rate of unemployment also the state influences the market power of workers through the educational system, which – eventually – provides qualifications, the welfare system, unemployment benefits and social security, or by implementing for instance disciplinary labor market policies (ASU, 2013: 287).

While structural power can theoretically also be exerted without a labor organization, **Associated (or organizational) Power** refers to the association of workers in collective political or labor organizations. The organized association of workers can compensate for a lack of structural power (e.g. in the light of widespread unemployment). This association can be works councils on the company level, trade unions and/or labor parties (Wright, 2000: 964). According to the authors, when trade unions are weak (e.g. low unionization rates), an allied political party could theoretically substitute for the lack of associated power by promoting the interests of workers and trade unions on a meso and macro level by passing respective laws on local or national level (ASU, 2013: 289). A basic measurement of associated power can be the number of members. Yet, important is also the infrastructure

¹³ Two basic resources of power (structural and associated) were first introduced by Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly Silver (2005) and advanced with the institutional dimension by the Strategic Unionism working group in Jena (Dörre et al., 2009). In 2013 the same faculty further developed the tool into a model, by adding a fourth resource of power with respect to influence in society, additional sub-categories and the crucial capabilities trade unions must develop in order to be able to effectively make use of the existing resources. In the following, this version of this approach will be briefly presented.

of the organization, its efficiency, participation and cohesion. Moreover, associated power also depends on the willingness of members to act. A trade union can be more powerful when its members play an active role at strikes, mobilizations and internal debates. Thus, '*Membership Participation*' is highly important for associated power (ibid.). Representation gaps between paid staff and the rank and file must therefore be dissipated, the organization de-bureaucratized in order to ensure that effective mobilization of the members is possible. Finally, without some degree of 'Inner Cohesion' or mutual solidarity of trade union members, associated power will suffer. A trade union is cohesive when its members have a collective identity that stems from close social networks, common experiences, emotional involvement, cultural embedment, and similar ideological lines. This is necessary not only in order to realize long-term projects, but also to stay forceful as an organization even during phases of crisis (ibid.: 292).

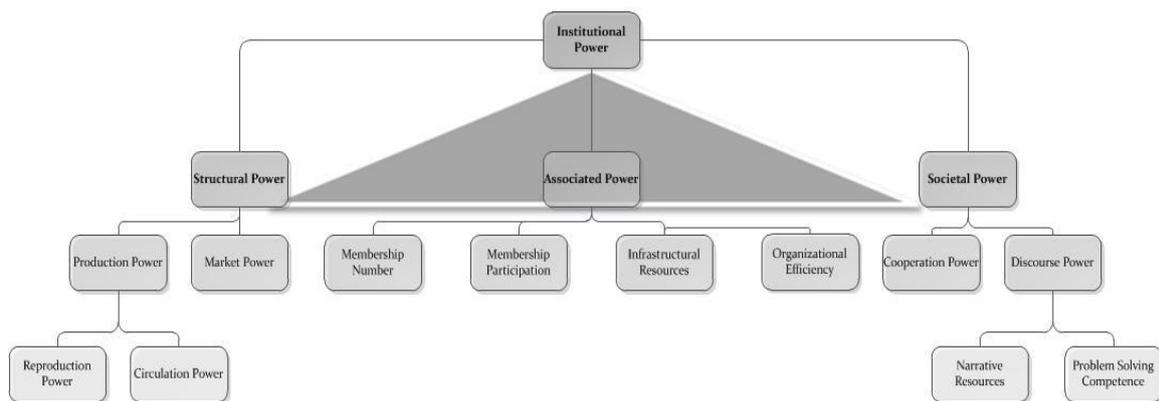
Structural and associated power are considered primary sources of power that can be manifested institutionally after struggles and negotiations incorporated in the secondary form of **Institutional Power** (ibid.: 293). This can be trade union and workers' rights, protections and privileges reflected in unwritten conventions or guaranteed by laws, bi- or tripartite pacts, agreements or even the constitution. But institutionalization has always a dual nature of long-term guarantees of freedoms on the one hand and limitations on the scope to act on the other. The latter can be no-strike-clauses or 'productivity coalitions' between trade unions and employers.

While representation of the interests of workers within the industrial relations system can be ensured, institutionalization has also a function of order and predictability necessary for the continuation of capital accumulation. Processes of juridification or deprivation of rights are always the result of historically specific balances of power between labor and capital (ibid: 295). Therefore, institutional power can also be transformed over time by changes in the economic circumstances, the stance of capital towards organized labor or direct attacks on labor rights by employers or the state. Yet, institutions do not change with the same pace as the economy but at a lot slower rate. The attitude of capital towards trade unions depends on the power, and influence of the latter as well as its potential to credibly threaten (Deppe, 1979: 89). Thus, a decrease in organizational power can reduce willingness of capital to recognize labor organizations or even to lobby for reduction of trade union protections, as during the labor law reforms in Great Britain under Margret Thatcher in the 1980s (ASU, 2013: 296).

When power resources are weakly developed - for instance taken the case of high unemployment, occupying a position of minor importance for the overall economy, low labor protection, and/or low union density - trade unions can still mobilize public support to make use of **Societal Power**. This type of power refers to either ‘*Cooperation Power*’ or ‘*Discourse Power*’. The former is the ability to form alliances and coalitions with other social agents (such as political parties, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], neighborhood assemblies, churches, political groups and so on) or to cooperate with other trade unions, in order to fight together for common goals and to promote the objectives of the workers. ‘*Discourse Power*’ is given when trade unions are able to receive public recognition, when their demands are perceived as just and rightful in the eyes of the population, when they are able to draw the public opinion on their side or when the sense of (in-)justice overlaps with socially broadly shared perceptions and assessments of reality (ibid.: 298).

The Power Resource Approach mainly emphasizes ‘power to’ of trade unions, that is power to do something, to act in order to achieve their goals. Yet, labor organizations are embedded in structures that limit their scope of action and they have to confront opponents with superiority in resources. Therefore the existing economic, political and social balances of power within society¹⁴, must be always considered when examining abilities of unions to act (ibid.: 312).

Figure 1: Power Resources and Sub-forms¹⁵



Source: Own Illustration based on categories of Jena Power Resource Approach (ASU, 2013)

¹⁴ This structural analysis must also be done on a global scale. The authors of this approach for instance mention global shifts of capital and production that influence both structural and associated power of trade unions e.g. when unionized plants or even entire sectors are being closed in one country while new locations and trades without trade union tradition emerge in other countries with less labor protection (ASU, 2013: 292).

¹⁵ Being at the top of the pyramid does not mean that institutional power is more important than the others, but that this dimension is partially influenced by the former (ASU, 2013: 300).

The model is not a static description of accumulative categories though, but a dynamic concept with which changes and reciprocal influences within and between the dimensions can be captured and eventually explained. For instance, a group of workers located in strategic positions, such as pilots, can succeed high gains for their own group, thus increase their particular institutional power only due to their leverage in the economy, that is their structural power, even if they are few (ibid.: 302). Another example refers to the reciprocal relation between associated, institutional and societal power. A large organization will more likely be recognized in society than a group with few members. The different possible combinations of the four sources of power allows for numerous such examples of their impact on each other. Due to the tensions that exist between the sources of power however it is certainly impossible to develop all these resources to the same extent simultaneously (ibid.: 312). For instance, depending on the legal framework, great institutional power can also limit the ability of trade unions to exert structural power via industrial actions, thus leading to a loss of disappointed members and a resulting decreasing associated power (ASU, 2013: 265).

However, having access to sources of power alone is insufficient in order to successfully enforce workers' interests. To be able to actually apply the available resources of power (ibid.: 311) trade unions also have to develop capabilities like learning aptitude, organizational flexibility, capability for conflict, framing and keeping autonomy. They thus have to make "strategic choices¹⁶" (ibid.: 306) to resolve through which capabilities what resources of power can be activated at a certain point of time. Considering these capabilities together with the given resources of power also allows the inclusion of inner contradictions of trade unions into the analysis. That is to say, having a great number of affiliates but not the ability of organizational flexibility (due to inner resistance to change by union officers for example) significantly limits the probability for making effective use of the potential of associated power.

¹⁶ The underlying assumption of this concept is that trade unions are „institutional entrepreneurs“ (ASU, 2013: 306) and as such they are subordinated to certain established logics of actions, that make the utilization of specific power resources more likely than the development of another. However, often a successful strategic choices lies in precisely the ability to break with institutionally assigned roles and routines of action (ibid.).

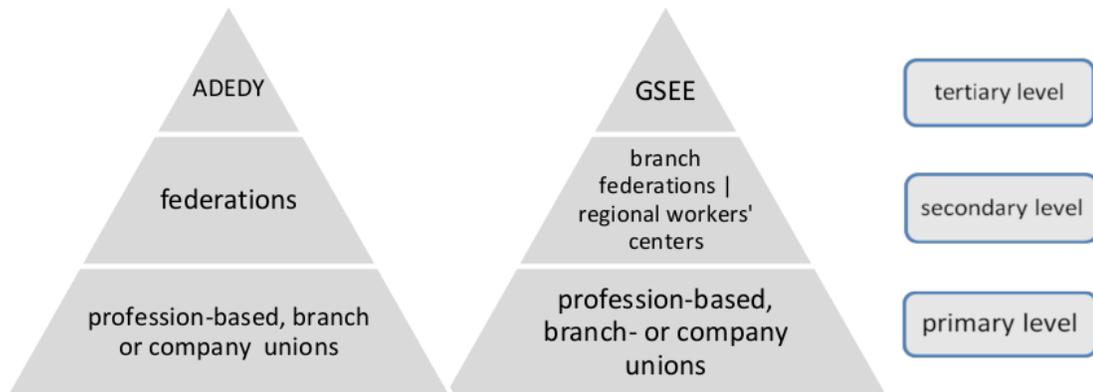
4. Trade Unionism in Greece

In the following section the situation of the trade union movement in Greece will be analyzed to better understand what problems rank-and-file activists and grassroots unions actually try to overcome. As characteristics specific to the case of Greece are seen by some scholars as main causes of trade union crisis (Kapsalis, 2012: 5), first idiosyncrasies of Greek trade unionism will be outlined. Subsequently the sources of power of Greek trade unions will be examined, to finally give an overview of recent indicators of renewal of the labor movement. Relevant findings in the existing knowledge body on trade unionism in Greece will be summarized and structured by the Power Resource Approach.

4.1 *Idiosyncrasies of Greek Unionism*

The Greek trade union system is characterized by a dual structure divided into private sector and public sector organizations. Workers employed in the private economy can join primary level trade unions that belong to the structure of GSEE, the General Confederation of Greek Labor. In the private sector only the GSEE is allowed by law to carry out national collective bargaining and has the monopoly for all other trade union competences on a countrywide basis (Kouzis, 2007: 218). Workers employed under public law contracts (e.g. civil servants, teachers, workers of public enterprises) are entitled to join primary level trade unions that belong to the structure of ADEDY, the Supreme Administration of Civil Servants' Trade-Unions. Both confederations GSEE and ADEDY comprise the so-called tertiary level of trade union structures in Greece, that is labor representation on the national level. Branch federations of trade unions and local workers' centers (Ergatika Kentra)¹⁷ according to district belong to the secondary level of unions. Primary level trade unions include company, regional or branch unions (Ioannou, 2000b: 11).

¹⁷ Workers' centers consist only of *private* sector primary level unions in one specific region. Usually, every primary level union is a member both of one craft federation and one workers' center (Ioannou, 2000b: 12).

Figure 2: Structure of Organized Labor in Greece

Source: Own illustration based on Ioannou (2000b: 11-12)

While trade unions in Greece are formally independent since the end of military dictatorship in 1974, they developed “a ‘clientelist’ relationship with the state” (Upchurch/Mathers, 2011: 11), political parties and the respective governments (Ioannou, 2000b: 31). Moreover, Greece exhibits a state-centered industrial relations’ system (EC, 2013b: 47).

The term used throughout the interviews identifying the kind of unionism under critique, the dominant model of trade unions, was “bureaucracy” (cf. I1: 449; I2: 25) or “bureaucratic unionism” (I3: 667). Taking into account the “rank-and-file versus bureaucracy debate” (Darlington/Upchurch, 2012), this is not surprising, as it is a common term widely used to describe the “separation of representation from mobilization, a hierarchy of control and activism and the detachment of formal mechanisms of policy and decision-making from the experience of members” (ibid.: 80). A common theme that resonates with this term is the lamentation of a democracy deficit and a lack of power of the rank-and-file within the unions, which is consistent with the aspects of unionism identified as problems in Greece.

The Relation of Trade Unions to the State

The literature on the labor movement in Greece agrees upon that the upper levels of trade unions (secondary and tertiary) do not rely directly upon members` contributions but

financially depend on public funding, thus the state¹⁸, specifically on the Ministry of Labor (cf. Katsoridas, 2007; Kouzis, 2007; Ioannou 2000a). The Ministry of Labor and the Social Security Center (IKA) determine the requirements of distribution of funds, which are given according to the number of voting members of each trade union (Ioannou, 2000b: 18). This means until the reforms, the state collected, managed and redistributed workers' unions dues. The access to and management of this partially externally provided income is hence limited as it depends on the volatile relation to the state and its representatives. More specifically, around 88% of GSEE funds came from OEE (Ergatiki Estia Organization¹⁹), while only 1.4% from member dues²⁰ (ibid., 2000a: 282).

This dependence on the state led to potential for pressure by the government, as for example in the early nineties when funding was reduced significantly, presenting an existential threat to trade unions (Kouzis, 2007: 175-189). While this experience of paralysis led to internal debates on the necessity for financial autonomy, after successfully reclaiming funding via the OEE, no practical measures were taken, so that this system persisted until recently (Ioannou, 2000b: 17). With the enactment of the second economic adjustment program for Greece, OEE was shut down and employers' social security contribution were reduced by 5% per decree (EC, 2012: 110). Its services, including social benefits for workers and funding of trade unions were transferred to the Organization for Employment of the Labor Force (OAED) with a reduction of funding for unions by 10%, thus from 18 million to 15 million Euro, even if the funds are still co-funded by employees' contributions via their salaries (Salourou, 2013). In other words, a part of the contributions received from the workers were not re-distributed to unions. The negligibility of members' dues must also result in a lack of strike funds. While this could potentially limit the autonomy of trade unions and their militant character (Kretsos, 2011:

¹⁸ Primary level unions however, seem to rely mainly on members' dues (I3: 621).

¹⁹ Labor Center Organizations (not to be confused with *workers'* centers) was a tripartite institution that gave trade unions one third of its funds based on the one hand on compulsory contributions by employers and employees to the social security fund and on the other hand on funding of the Ministry of Labor. This system of obligatory payment of contributions – which was introduced during the dictatorship of Metaxas (1936 – 1940) – was the main source of funding of trade unions (Ioannou, 2000b: 17).

²⁰ The remaining share is mainly covered by EU-subsidies and to a lower extent by interests (Ioannou, 2000b: 17).

276) solidarity fundraising and private investment of the workers themselves²¹ compensated for this deficiency.

Based on the Power Resource approach it can be claimed that this specific relation to the state puts limits to the development of certain crucial capacities of trade unions, such as the ability to maintain autonomy from third parties. For instance, being economically dependent on public funds can limit the ability for conflict in relation to the state, as a militant stance towards this ‘public employer’ can threaten funding - the material basis of operation of trade unions – as indeed happened. It might eventually not be a coincidence that the shifting of funding towards more direct control by the state happened after three years of heightened industrial conflict. Finally, this dependency relationship can deteriorate possibilities of developing organizational flexibility, as the Ministry of Labor determines what union is eligible for funding and the amount of money it can receive. This is tied to criteria of how trade unions are required to be structured and organized (Tsakiris, 2012).

Trade Unions and Factions of Political Parties

While direct state interventionism within labor organizations formally stopped in 1989/1990, state control continues indirectly via the influence of (governmental) parties, according to some researchers (Soros, 2012; Tsakiris, 2012). The fragmentation of union administration along lines of political parties challenges the “right of GSEE leadership’s relative autonomy from the state and from the machinery of political parties” (Ioannou, 2000b: 17). Instead of asserting their interests through collective bargaining and related industrial actions, industrial relations researchers claim that in Greece “[u]nion power is traditionally derived more from these clientelist relationships with political parties” (Upchurch/Mathers, 2011: 11).

While the general confederation of labor presents itself as a united organization, related literature suggests that there is actually a competitive co-existence of political factions that try to transmit political strategies of parties from the parliament to the world of trade unions (Koukoules/Tzanetakos, 1986: 21). After the fall of dictatorship in 1974,

²¹ One of the interviewees claimed: “From my wage I have paid thirty strikes. Every year I pay about 900 Euro in strikes” (I3: 703-704).

the existence of party factions was constitutionally bestowed and since then every political party has its own faction, which is almost identical to the political body that controls it. Unions are thus a terrain of power struggles among the main political forces.

During union elections, similar to parliamentary elections, different union factions that are related to political parties compete against each other for the votes of workers. These elections take place at all three levels of trade unionism. The degree of factionalism increases with the level of unionism, peaking at the tertiary level. This results in a fragmented leadership and administration at all three levels, including the primary level trade union, workers' center, federation and the national level. Every faction receives a certain amount of seats in the administrative council of the respective body, according to the results of trade union elections. At the primary level the administrative council is generally the executive body of the union that is in charge of the realization, custody and direction of all matters of the trade union (KEPEA, 2014). It is responsible for planning the strategy, to collective bargaining demands, political declarations and industrial actions. Moreover, the administrative council represents the union externally and juridically (*ibid.*). Consequently, as this council is formed by representatives of party-factions, political parties have direct access to the entire spectrum of trade union business.

Traditionally the main forces within national confederation and its member unions are PASKE²² (close to the social-democratic party PASOK), DAKE²³ (close to the conservative party Nea Dimokratia/New Democracy), and various line-ups affiliated to the communist party KKE, and part of its union network PAME, like DAS²⁴ on the tertiary level. Finally, the faction Aftonomi Paremvasi²⁵ – Anti-Memorandum Cooperation related to the New-Left party (Synaspismos or Syriza) increasingly gains votes²⁶ (Kouzis, 2007: 200).

²² Panhellenic Militant Trade Union Movement

²³ Democratic Independent Movement of Workers

²⁴ Democratic Militant Cooperation

²⁵ Autonomous Intervention

²⁶ At the 35th congress of GSEE in 2013, PASKE got 34.52% (16 seats in the administration) of the votes, DAKE 24.35% (11 seats), DAS 22.22% (10 seats), Autonomous Intervention 10.40% (5 seats), while the rest of the votes was distributed among other smaller factions (GSEE, 2013).

The results of union election at the primary level directly influence the distribution of power on the above levels (secondary and tertiary) between the political forces. It is criticized that from the perspective of the union bureaucracy the value of primary level unions is reduced to sources for seats in the upper administration. Primary level unions without party factions therefore face a lot more obstacles during the process of recognition by the overall union bureaucracy. According to the union scholar when “representatives of independent unions appear, or from unions that are not controlled by factions, when it comes to the procedure of recognition at the congress of GSEE they are being excluded from the congress” (I5: 218-220).

According to the scholar of INE, independent unions without factions are perceived as worthless for the overall union bureaucracy as they do not fulfil the function of potential electoral support. For one part of the dominant political forces within the unions, a smaller amount of unions is favorable, as the absolute number of their votes then translates into higher percentages in the ultimate result. Therefore, “where unions appear which they can apparently not control, they don’t even sign them up in the secondary level organizations, they try to find various ways to exclude them from signing up” (I5: 207-2010). On the other hand though, new paper-tiger unions are frequently created in order to ensure their full factional control, fragmenting the labor movement even further (Kouzis, 2007: 200). Thus factionalism is a serious threat to workers’ power in Greece as it apparently hinders a strategy of natural growth, given that the labor bureaucracy keeps certain unions from establishing.

The consequences of this situation for the labor movement in Greece are far-reaching, affecting the unity of workers, their strategies and approaches. First, the control of unions by parties means that workers cannot develop coherent trade union and industrial relation strategies independent from the diverging plans of political parties. The predominance of factional logic over class-based organization is tangent to the inner cohesion of each union and the labor movement as a whole. Hence, the encroachment of political parties in the labor movement also lowers its inner cohesion and compresses its associated power.

Certainly, this leads to internal political and ideological competition and cleavages between the various political currents within the union, but also to deep divisions, and entrenchments according to specific political interests (Kouzis, 2007: 35). Moreover, it

leads to a situation where the prevailing culture in the union is not one of planning to increase gains as employees against employers, but to increase gains as a party against the other competing parties (ibid.: 32). Instead of showing the balance of power within industrial relations, trade unions are thus analyzed by researchers as a tool to shape the balance of power between political parties (Ioannou, 2000a: 287). When led and divided by party representatives, trade unions tend to prioritize strategies that build the power of the dominant parties over strategies designed to increase workers' power (Koukoules/Tzanetakos, 1986: 65).

According to surveys on the attitudes of workers towards trade unions, factionalism, and the control by political parties are the main reasons for discontent of employees towards trade unions, leading to a loss of members during the past two decades (Kapsalis, 2012: 6). The direct connection to political parties thus lowers societal powers of unions and as a result the membership dimension of associated power decreases.

4.2 Assessing the Power of Trade Unions in Greece

Institutional Power: From Relative Protection to High Exposure

According to the approach underlying the Memoranda of Understanding, employment protection in Greece was perceived as a major obstacle to domestic market liberalization, while a powerful opposition of allegedly overprotected labor was considered as limiting the ability of the state and the government to implement structural changes in the economy (Kretsos, 2011: 265). This is supported by studies prior to the economic adjustments of the last years, showing that Greece belonged to the countries with the strictest employment protection legislation²⁷ amongst OECD countries (Ochel/Rohwer, 2009: 3). Moreover, in Greece every worker is covered by the national collective agreement (signed by the upper level trade unions and the employer associations) that also determines the minimum wage (Kouzis, 2007: 210). Yet, as will be illustrated in the following, according to the majority of union studies in this country “Greek trade unions

²⁷ Typical examples of protection include regulation of temporary employment, high contributions by employers to social security in comparison to other OECD countries and member-states of the EU, implicit permanent job status for the vast majority of public workers, as well as high severance payments and other constraints on dismissals (OECD, 2007: 9).

are not as powerful and Greek workers not as protected” (Kretsos, 2011: 266) as the above accounts suggest.

While industrial relations in Greece, formally, might have been highly regulated before the economic crisis, these regulations were often not enforced and did not apply to all employees, as many workers were being excluded from collective bargaining coverage and did not benefit from labor law protection (Kouzis, 2009). For example, many rights such as health and safety issues or works councils only apply to companies with more than 50 or even 100 employees (Ioannou, 2000a: 286). High levels of violations of labor rights and a great extent of informal work compared to other EU-15 member states indicate that a judicious regulatory framework guaranteeing the protection of workers was not fully developed (Kretsos, 2004). As a result, an increasing part of the working population was “underpaid, overworked and struggling to meet the rising costs of living long before the economic crisis of 2009–10” (Kretsos, 2010: 17).

Economic adjustment programs were implemented with the memoranda in May 2010 and March 2012 (EC, 2013a) including austerity measures with the aim of reducing public expenditures, deregulation of labor rights and flexibilization of labor markets. Deregulation and flexibilization of the labor market imply for instance making dismissals and collective redundancies a lot easier, giving enterprises and the state greater autonomy in laying off workers in terms of noticing time and severance payments (*ibid.*: 15). Even civil servants are not irredeemable anymore (Kouzis et al., 2011: 190). These freedoms for employers have had serious impacts with regards to repression of trade unions, as hundreds of redundancies were especially directed towards unionists and union activists (Kapsalis, 2012: 15). These measures thus directly impact the structural power of trade unions, especially the market power of their constituents. Easier dismissals raise the risk of defending workers’ rights with strikes, as the fear and costs of striking increase.

Moreover, measures to assess the criteria of representativeness of trade unions have been adopted (*ibid.*: 13), threatening the decline of their institutional but also societal power. The representativeness is directly connected to the formal recognition of trade unions as eligible for collective bargaining or other trade union privileges and rights. Moreover, being officially declared as not representative can seriously lower legitimacy

in society. Not being able to sign a collective agreement lowers the advantages and thus incentives for workers to participate in unions and thus lowers associated power.

Besides legal changes in the field of social security, the juridical area mainly affected by these reforms was related to collective bargaining (Kapsalis, 2012: 11). Collective bargaining systems were decentralized and thus weakened by favoring (mostly worse) individual contracts or agreements on company level over industrial/branch collective agreements, thus reducing the general standards (EC, 2012: 37). What sounds as a bureaucratic minor change in details actually has dramatic effects on the working reality of many workers, considering that, due to certain characteristics of the industrial relations system, which will be discussed below, in Greece workers tended to organize exactly on that level of branches/crafts.

Before the introduction of the reforms there were almost no company level collective agreements in place, as the private sector is mainly organized at the branch level. Therefore, a direct result of the reform of collective bargaining system was the dramatic spread of individual agreements between the employer and single employees (Kapsalis, 2012: 13). Law N.4024/2011 introduced 'associations of employees' (AoE). AoEs are not unions, their independence from employers is not guaranteed but they are qualified to sign collective agreements on firm level. AoEs are significantly more likely to introduce wage cuts compared to unions (Daouli et al., 2013: 4-11). This is hence a direct attack on a core dimension of institutional power of trade unions. Hitherto academic analyses on these issues refer to the destruction, abolition, illegalization or even death of the collective bargaining and collective agreement system in Greece (Kouzis et al., 2011: 187). One interviewed worker directly affected by the devaluation of the branch collective agreement he previously profited of laments that this would “undermine the ground on which the existence of the union is based” (I4: 145-146). Certainly, these changes to industrial relations and the devaluation of collective bargaining and agreements weaken the ability of trade unions to achieve even minimal gains for workers as they undermine the bargaining ability of unions.

Moreover, with new laws governments have also allowed the reduction of wages and benefits in the private and public sector. The national minimum wage was reduced by 22% for those above the age of 25 (KEPEA, 2013). Those under the age of 25 and those

still in training get only 70% of the standard wage (ibid., 2011: 190). According to the latest national collective agreement (May 2013) the (full-time) minimum wage for employees over 25 years stands at €586.08 per month, and for those below the age of 25 it stands at €357 (pre-tax) per month (KEPEA, 2013). With a lack of union representation at company level, and the annulations of branch collective agreements, the minimum wage is actually the average wage to be expected in the private sector.

New forms of contracts, such as sub-contracting, temporal work and short-term contracts have also been made a lot easier. For instance, a new “youth contract” (Clauwaert/Schönmann, 2012: 11) has been implemented that allows employers to pay young employees under the age of 25 a wage 20% lower than before, with a probation period of two years, without social security contributions and without being eligible to unemployment benefits after the contract is expired (ibid.). As these working conditions are bestowed by law, trade unions have no direct leverage vis-à-vis employers to fight against precarity. The new laws also facilitate labor leasing in order to engage the unemployed, while after one year of unemployment respective benefits are being substituted by vocational training opportunities (Kouzis et al., 2011: 188). With no perspective on alternative income and amidst widespread unemployment, the decline in institutional power also shifts workers’ market power downward.

The eight-hour-day is also increasingly threatened or even called off, as rules concerning working hours and overtime are being deregulated. The most recent change is that in November 2013 even Sundays had been called off as a legal holiday (Potamianos, 2013). This reversal of traditional trade union achievements further reflects the loss of institutional power.

As the labor law reforms contradict fundamental labor law principles, and have widely been considered as partially illegal and undemocratic (Kapsalis, 2012: 15), Greek trade unions have filed complaints before the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Council of Europe claiming that the adjustment programs violated the principle of trade union autonomy and freedom of association (Clauwaert/Schönmann, 2012: 15). While the Council of Europe declared some reforms illegal (Reuters, 2012) and the ILO condemned the exclusion of social partners in decision-making and the violation of fundamental worker’s rights (ITUC, 2012), these public admonitions did not have any

significant effect on the general orientation of the reforms. Amnesty International has also criticized repression of trade union freedoms by the state (AI, 2013).

Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, Greek authorities have enacted emergency laws several times with the aim of preventing strikes by prohibiting them with intimidating sanctions such as detention, dismissals or financial admonitions (Erodotos, 2013). The state can force employees to work only in situations of emergency such as war, natural catastrophes and if the public health is at serious danger (AI, 2013). Notwithstanding, this clause was not applied to the police, armed forces or hospitals but to janitors (2011) and in 2013 to metro-workers, dockworkers and teachers (Erodotos, 2013). Accordingly, institutionalized freedoms of trade unions have been repeatedly seriously limited and called-off. In the case of an attempted teachers' strike in mid-May 2013, all political parties, including even KKE and SYRIZA, which are generally expected to support workers' struggles, called off the plans – against the decision of the general assembly of teachers – and the strike was banned by decree (Polenta, 2013).

Regarding a resumed development of institutional power at the moment it seems rather futile to engage in efforts that directly address this pillar, as this is a *secondary* source of power. Without having developed primary sources of power, any attempts of social dialogue will prove asymmetrical and can be easily called off. Thus, any respective commitment in the current context will merely make trade unions vulnerable to blackmailing, as there is not much potential to really threaten and pressure employers²⁸.

The majority of progressive trade unionists in Greece on the other hand, put efforts in supporting an electoral victory of SYRIZA, with the hope of reversing recent labor market adjustments, to then be in a better position to do trade union work (I3: 748). This approach is well captured by the following statement of Bronfenbrenner, a renowned US-researcher on trade union revitalization:

²⁸ For instance, in order to gain more structural power, it could be recommendable for the coordination of primary level unions, to especially approach trade unions in key positions in the economy to join them in their cause. These would include trade unions for example in suppliers of electric energy, telecommunications, or water supply, transports, or the shipping industry as workers in these areas potentially have a lot more leverage and disruptive power than say book workers.

“Not only did they continue to blame external forces for their organizing difficulties, but they also continued to seek to be rescued by their political allies, blinded by the belief that organizing renewal was entirely dependent on first achieving significant labor law reforms. In doing so, they failed to understand that the deteriorating legal climate for organizing has been a direct result of their declining numbers and political power. In fact, only through organizing massive numbers of new members in every sector of the economy, will [...] unions once again have the political leverage to ensure more progressive and more effective labor legislation.” (Bronfenbrenner, 2003: 47)

Bronfenbrenner goes along with the Power Resource Approach in the sense that institutional power expressed in pro-labor laws cannot be achieved without previously strengthening the pillar on which legal privileges are based – the power of large associations. While she refers to the US labor movement a decade ago, this observation also applies to the case of Greece, as the inability of overall Greek unionism to break with factionalism eventually reflects the notion, that the political allies only need to gain electoral support, in order to improve the situation of trade unions, by reversing the memoranda per decree. Furthermore, Greek union activists also tend to blame external factors for their organizing difficulties. Employers’ attacks on unionized, but also unorganized workers, and attacks by the state on trade union rights, are widely expressed as crucial reasons for difficulties of trade unions (cf. I1: 26; I5: 177-178; I4: 140-147).

Concluding this appraisal, it could be argued that the institutional framework, which existed until the labor reforms in Greece, represented an outdated relation of social forces between employers and labor, as the latter lost strength due to its lack of autonomy but also further factors. In the following section, I will answer what conditions of the primary sources of power led to the inability of trade unions to defend the secondary pillar of institutional power and to prevent it from collapsing.

Associated Power: Unevenness between Private and Public Sector Unions

A public sector worker claims that “the private sector is a desert of unionization” (I3: 348-349). According to the perception of the interviewees, low unionization rates in the private sector is a proof of the disfunctionality of all unions, as the inability is not limited to one specific, but applies to all kinds of unions, either militant or moderate, independent or run by party factions.

Low associated power in the private sector is related to the legislative framework as more than 20 signatures of workers are legally required to be eligible to form a union. In this way, law constricts organizational autonomy of trade unions. But it also reflects a lack of continuous vindication of changing these requirements on part of labor (Kapsalis, 2012: 7). In the Greek economy, about 97% are small businesses having less than 20 employees (Kouzis, 2007: 123). “In Greece companies with more than 250 are around 200. All the others are small. About 87% of workers are employed in firms with less than 10 employees” (I5: 14-16) according to the industrial relations scholar. This law hence poses a real burden to unionization at workplace level. Unionization is mainly concentrated on those few large companies and many of those recently closed during economic recession²⁹. According to studies on union presence, 98% of workplaces in the private sector do not have collective representation (Kapsalis, 2012: 7). But still, “[i]t is here that class relations are forged, surplus produced, members recruited, organized” (Fairbrother/Yates, 2003: 23). As union representation at the workplace level is difficult due to the size of companies, before the reforms at the primary level workers tended to organize in craft unions based on profession³⁰.

The small companies sector is not only characterized by the absence of trade unions, but has long been also affected by deregulation, flexible working schedules, informal employment, exploitation of low-wage immigrant workers, individualized industrial relations, lack of effective labor inspection and of basic labor standards (Ioannou, 2000a: 300). “Especially in small companies a unionized person is stigmatized” (I5: 195-196) the trade union researcher claims. The domination of small businesses in the private

²⁹ “Many large companies have closed and mainly *there* appears union density. Unions are mainly in large companies.” (I5: 40-42)

³⁰ “Because this does not allow the creation of company level unions, there are mainly unions with branch characteristics, profession-sector unions.” (I5: 169-171)

economy indicates a decentralization and fragmentation of economic units. This does not favor the structural power of workers, as key positions with disruptive power for whole chains of production and distribution are rare. Low unionization rates finally lead to an inability to defend basic labor rights, such as legally required health and safety standards at company level. Consequently, there is a reciprocal relationship between low organization rate, low legal protection and structural weakness of workers in the private economy dominated by small businesses.

While literature on trade unionism in Greece is consistent in the claim that the private sector is little unionized, the actual numbers referred to vary, depending on the source of data acquisition. The main official source of information on union membership in Greece is the declaration of GSEE and ADEDY on participation rates at the congress of the general federation of labor. Therefore, trade union researchers suggest for the case of Greece to consider the difficulty of comparability of Greek union density to other countries. Some even claim that in Greece it merely reflects the tri-annual political capacity of trade unions to mobilize workers to vote for representatives at the GSEE-ADEDY congress (Ioannou, 2000a: 283). Moreover, in Greece union density is calculated by dividing the number of members who participated at the union elections by the total number of the people actually employed. This means in times of higher unemployment, statistically unionization rates also increase artificially as the number of members is divided by fewer employed persons³¹ (Katsoridas, 2008: 144-146). It is also claimed that trade unions tend to present affiliation rates that exceed the real amount of members, as this number also determines the amount of funding they receive³² (Zisimopoulos et al., 2013). Therefore surveys with workers present more alarming results regarding unionization rates than the indications in the congress statistics made by GSEE and ADEDY themselves. For instance, according to surveys conducted by the

³¹ Apart of the unemployed, immigrant workers are also not included in these calculations. However, as trade unions have remained with their traditional affiliates – in general the more privileged workers of the public sector – they generally do not represent a great part of the workforce, excluding the most vulnerable parts of the working population as they underrepresent young, female and immigrant workers (Kapsalis, 2007: 263). As immigrants generally lack union representation, the statistical exclusion is not expected to bias the general numbers of affiliation.

³² “They create artificial members that do not exist, in order to appear greater in their representation” (15: 210-212).

trade union research institute (INE), 82% of workers in the private and 32% of workers in the public sector say they are not member of a union (Vprc, 2008; cited in Kapsalis, 2012: 7; Kouzis, 2007: 115). Other sources claim that union density in the private sector lies between 15% (Katsoridas, 2007; cited in Kretsos, 2011: 267) and 18% (Kouzis, 2007: 115). In addition, the above numbers reflect a pre-crisis level of union density. While due to calculation methods unemployment might statistically improve unionization rates, in absolute numbers it is actually more probable that the number of union members has declined during the last four years, as many trade union members have lost their jobs.

According to GSEE and ADEDY, though in 2012 overall union density in both the private and the public sector together stood at around 24%³³ (Visser, 2013), implying a loss by 15% in two decades, despite a parallel increase of the absolute number of wage-dependent persons (Kapsalis, 2012: 6).

Moreover, organizational efficiency and inner cohesion are also underdeveloped. At the primary level, there are thousands of unions of low membership rates each, oftentimes competing each other due to overlapping responsibilities regarding which unions represent what workplaces (Kouzis, 2007: 101-114). There are 3.500 primary level and 200 secondary level organizations (federations). Some extreme cases even evidence the parallel existence of 12 competing unions for one single sector (Kapsalis, 2012: 8). The related but more general organizational fragmentation and the resulting lack of cohesion are also seen as major deficiencies of the Greek trade union system. “There are already many many unions – characteristic part of bureaucracy. There is a distinct for cooks, a separate for waiters and so on. There are 200 trade unions for hotel workers, which are created to be controlled, to take out seats etc.” (I1: 254-257) the food and tourism unionist explains. While the actual number of parallel unions certainly is an exaggeration, his point is that the inflation of unions in certain sectors is also a direct symptom of factionalism. Many primary level unions are created solely with the aim to be controlled by one party, leading to a situation where each faction creates an own union (Kouzis, 2007: 35). With more organizational cohesion the existing structural circulation power in tourism could be exploited to a much greater extent though. Organizational

³³ Apart from the numbers indicated by GSEE/ADEDY there are currently no up to date survey results on union membership during economic recession in Greece though.

splintering of unions on the primary level is also seen as a flaw directly related to the bureaucratic functioning of unions in Greece, as it is a result of party-controlled factionalism of the trade union administration.

Trade unions of the public sector are over-represented within general trade union structures. Despite the fact that only 34% of places of employment are in the public sector, 55% of all union-members are public servants (Kapsalis, 2012: 6).

Moreover, a serious deficiency of Greek trade unions is perceived by scholars in the representation gap regarding flexible and precarious employment, immigrants, youth, new branches and women (ibid.: 6-7). In this way, the demographics of the average unionized person (men, middle-aged, secure employment, non-immigrant background) decreasingly overlap with the characteristics of the average worker (young, precarious job, with a likelihood of 40% to be a woman, and 12% to be an immigrant; ibid.).

Concluding, associated power of Greek unions is limited regarding all dimensions of organizational strength, including low membership rates especially in the private sector, lack of organizational and strategic cohesion and lack of infrastructural resources. The main reasons for low union density identified in existing literature include the lack of union representation on company/workplace level, and workers' negative opinion regarding trade unions due to party-based factionalism (ibid.). According to a survey by INE, in 2010, 69% of (unionized and non-unionized) workers did not believe in the effectiveness of existing unionism, although 77% considered unions in general as still necessary despite discontent with the prevailing way of functioning (INE/ Vprc, 2010).

Structural Power: Unemployment and Unexploited Circulation Power

While in the trade union literature on Greece there are not many explicit indicators on the structural power of trade unions, a general impression can be reconstructed by considering data on unemployment, the welfare state and the general structure of the Greek economy.

A general lack of structural power can be assumed from the predominance of small businesses as it implies a high fragmentation and decentralization. This means that most of Greek workers are not in key positions where actions can have impact on whole chains of production or distribution, as those prevail in locations of greater centralization.

Scarcity of jobs increases competition between workers and thus reduces their leverage in the labor market. As Greece with 27.3% has the highest unemployment rate in Europe (Eurostat, 2013), trade unions have a very low market power. Youth unemployment is even higher with 55.3% (ibid.).

Market power increases also with the availability of other non-wage sources of income, such as social benefits. The Greek welfare state, which was never developed comparably to continental European standards (Sotiropoulos, 2004: 267), was further cut back through the economic adjustment programs. This contributes to the weak market and structural power of workers in Greece: Not having alternatives neither in the search of a better job nor other sources of income, certainly results in vested fears of being dismissed and the subsequent unemployment can thus potentially reduce the capacity and willingness of workers in the private sector for long-term strikes.

The predominance of services in the Greek economy can be an indicator of a greater potential in circulation power compared to production power. 80.6% of the GDP come from the service sector, which employs 65.1% of the labor force, while industry³⁴ employs 22.5% of the working population contributing with 16% to the GDP. Agriculture makes up for only 3.4% of the GDP while employing 12.4% of the overall workforce (CIA, 2013). Accordingly, most workers are employed in the service sector. But what professions and occupations does this area of employment include? According to ELSTAT, the Greek Statistical authority, most people (in this categorization 31.8% of the workforce) work in trade, hotels and restaurants, transport and communication (ELSTAT, 2013: 31). Most of these categories (especially retail, harborage and gastronomy) are closely related to the industry of tourism, which is one of the most important economic sectors of Greece. According to the World Tourism Organization, in 2012 Greece received around 15.5 million international tourists, being the 16th most visited country in the world (UNWTO, 2013: 8).

Another very important industry is shipping. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Greek Merchant Navy is the largest

³⁴ These calculations on 'industry' in Greece not only refer to classical industrial production (which in Greece would include chemicals, metal products; mining, petroleum), but also manufacturing (textiles, processing of food and tobacco) and very important for the case of Greece: tourism (CIA, 2013).

worldwide accounting for 15.7% of global deadweight tonnage (UNCTAD, 2013: 43). Potentially, workers in this sector could make use of circulation power as they can limit the realization of profits by blockading the transport of goods. Therefore, it might be no coincidence that the group of workers that was most frequently hit by the aforementioned state repression and strike-ban were seafarers (Erodotos, 2013). Eight out of eleven enactments of emergency laws forbidding strikes since the 1980s were applied to transport workers, including tank-, bus- and truck-drivers, airline-employees, metro-workers and dockworkers (ibid.).

Concluding, structural power potentially exists more in the form of circulation rather than production power. Nevertheless, due to the decentralized private economy with low union representation, high unemployment, and decreased labor protection in terms of unemployment benefits or regulation of redundancies, structural power of trade unions and workers in Greece is assumed to be weak.

Societal Power: Inter-Union Solidarities and Social Movements

A comprehensive presentation of all occurrences of inter-union solidarity, cooperation with other movements and indices of discursive intervention goes certainly beyond the scope of this synoptical section, due to the amount of examples that can be found in isolated press articles, reports, leaflets and so on.³⁵ A brief overview shall in any case be given without claiming to be close to covering the whole picture.

Regarding cooperation as one part of societal power, it is common to find protests organized by more than one trade union, federation or confederation (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 90). Apart from commonly organized strikes on branch or regional level, ADEDY and GSEE also cooperate in organizing nationwide general and solidarity strikes (ibid.: 91).

With respect to discourse power, related literature suggests that during an early phase of resistance against economic adjustment, mass media successfully orchestrated an enormous defamation of trade unions, in order to prevent a mass mobilization against the

³⁵ In addition, while it can be observed that Greek trade unions employ means of societal power, it is uncertain and empirically not proved to what extent they actually manage to exert power, influence and pressure in that way. This must be the task of a different research project with the specific aim of measuring the actual degree of societal power of trade unions by utilization of discourse analysis.

structural adjustments (Kapsalis, 2012: 16). In the course of development of the crisis and resistance, trade unions were increasingly able to form alliances with the academic community, which helped to successfully intervene the public discourse with narratives of the achievements and necessity of trade unions (ibid.: 20). Besides being an expression of cooperation power, general strikes are always also political strikes with broader socio-political demands addressing the state, e.g. against economic adjustment programs (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 93), they are also a type of discourse intervention (ibid.: 90). But also secondary level union organizations, such as federations and workers' centers organized protests with clearly political demands (ibid.: 93).

Finally, most trade unions are certainly part of the broader anti-austerity movement, opposing not only cuts in public expenditures, but also privatization of public enterprises and services, as well as neoliberal labor market reforms. This society-wide movement, which evidences a mixture of cooperation and discourse power, consists of many initiatives, groups, organizations and projects ranging from the "I don't pay"-campaign³⁶, to self-organized health care centers, networks of solidarity economy, citizens' associations for the democratization of society and the economy, neighborhood assemblies and so on. As they share the oppositional stance towards the labor market reforms and cuts in education, the health care system, privatizations of telecommunication, the postal and railway sector etc., trade unions also count to the wider movement opposing economic adjustment programs (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 93).

Yet, it is also claimed that among the participants of the protests at Syntagma Square in summer 2011 there was a general aversion towards both political parties and trade unions (Kyriakopoulos, 2011). Others argue that these protests were "strongly backed by unions" (Shihade et al., 2012: 6) as they organized numerous manifestations and general strikes that gave impetus to the movement. Due to high mobilization rates, close connections between trade unions and new social movements could be established

³⁶ "Den Plirono" started as a campaign in opposition to privatization of public goods and broadened to a civil disobedience movement, including resistance to pay road charges, increased public transport fees, bailiffs, and against shut-down of electricity for those who cannot afford to pay heightened bills. Moreover they organize neighborhood assemblies and public debates on the source of debt, the Euro-crisis and the necessity to exit the Euro-zone (META, 2013).

(Gallas/Nowak, 2012: 93). On the squares and in neighborhood assemblies the labor movement and the anti-memoranda movement partially amalgamated. As a result they co-organized actions, activities and events together leading to an exchange but also synthesis of experiences and practices (Kapsalis, 2012: 20).

On the other hand, trade union struggles were also supported by activists and the general population. An outstanding example is the long-term strike of nine months³⁷ of the steelworkers of Greek Halyvourgia in Aspropyrgos that gained public support in forms ranging from solidarity statements and visits from other workplaces and trade unions, to material and financial support for the workers and their families including food, medicals, money etc. (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 98).

Reciprocal support between trade unions is also shown with solidarity strikes (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 92). The national confederations of labor GSEE and ADEDY e.g. called for temporal work stoppages in solidarity with employees of the private and public sector defending their collective agreements (ibid.: 97-98). The widespread solidarity between workers of different trade unions, especially those bridging the institutional division between the private and the public sector, was rare in previous decades (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 98-99).

Concluding, the enormous amount of examples of solidarity, between unions themselves or between unions and the overall politically active population, can indeed be interpreted as an indicator for a general societal power of trade unions³⁸, while simultaneously the widespread critique of unions among the population indicates a respective backlog of unions in this area.

³⁷ The strike started on 31st October 2011 and ended on 28th of July 2012 (Kapsalis, 2012: 17).

³⁸ A clear differentiation of cause and outcome – whether this is a result of their own efforts or of the general politicized situation due to harsh economic conditions – is not possible here due to its complexity.

Table 1: Power Resources of Greek Trade Unions

	Institutional	Associated	Societal	Structural
High	Pre-crisis: Employment protection regulation	Union density in Public sector; participation at strikes	Inter-union cooperation: solidarity and common strikes; discourse intervention	Circulation power: shipping, transport, retail High utilization degree of structural power due to frequent strikes (including many general strikes)
Low	Deregulation and flexibilization of labor markets; decentralization of collective bargaining	Low union density in public sector; low infrastructural resources; low participation opportunities due to administrative council; low organization flexibility due to state intervention	Deteriorating opinion of workers about unions due to factionalism; anti-union discourse in mass media; lack of problem solving competence of union bureaucracy	low industrial production; low market power due to under- developed welfare state and very high unemployment

Source: Own configuration based on information on Greek unionism in the literature and the dimensions of the Power Resource Approach (ASU, 2013).

5. Indicators of Renewal

According to the representative of INE, in the last 10 years there has not been any strategy for membership growth on part of the GSEE.³⁹ Contrarily, the trade union bureaucracy from time to time tries to expel independent unions that are not under its full control (I5: 204-210). “The official leadership of GSEE not only did not do any attempts to revitalize unions and to give them a new breath. Quite the contrary. It undermined

³⁹ The US-American approach to “organize the unorganized” (Fairbrother/Yates, 2003: 18) for instance, which is characterized by the active involvement of members and workers in campaigns, the so-called “organizing model” (ibid.) does not seem to have been adopted in a strategic or academic debate within and on trade unions and related academia in Greece. As such there are neither organizing campaigns nor is there any mentioning of it in the Greek literature on trade unionism. An assessment of the applicability of classical organizing methods to the new circumstances in Greece has not been made yet.

them to keep GSEE controlled by parties” (I5: 221-224). Despite a lacking strategy of revitalization from above, renewal of trade union activity has been witnessed in increased industrial actions since the outbreak of the crisis.

The main deficiencies of Greek trade unionism that are expected to be addressed by renewal strategies are organizing the large number of employees in the private sector that remain unorganized, the lack of inner cohesion of the labor movement due to factionalism and dichotomization between the public and the private sector. The main signs of revitalization of the Greek labor movement are reflected in an increase of industrial action since the outbreak of the economic crisis, the formation of oppositional and more militant trade union networks during the last 15 years and the emergence of new types of grassroots unions that put emphasis on internal democracy and autonomy from the state and political parties.

Regarding factionalism for instance, the trade union scholar of INE claims that for the past 15 years more and more primary level unions make use of so-called “united ballots” (I5: 135). These ballots refer to a specific type of vote-papers with candidates for union elections that do not belong to factions. In this model, candidates are elected based on their activity and not on their party affiliation. This strengthens inner cohesion and eventually also organizational efficiency. The industrial relations scholar is in favor of united ballots and unions without factions because this would solve many problems of workers (I5: 126-27). He claims that all factions, both the governmental and the left-wing factions, prioritize party issues over the common interests of the workers and this would have alienated many workers from the will to participate in unions (I5: 164-167). This implies that factions additionally lower associated power. He therefore considers this solution as a way to halt the decline of associated power (I5: 132-134).

5.1 *Industrial Actions and General Strikes*

According to a survey conducted by the trade union research institute INE (Labor Institute GSEE) on the heightened occurrences of industrial actions in 2011, there is a renewal through strike (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012). As the Ministry of Labor stopped recording strike activities in Greece in 1999, there are not sufficient quantitative data on industrial actions before and after this particular survey on strikes in 2011 so that

reconstruction of actual trade union actions might be a difficult undertaking (*ibid.*: 76), leaving a serious research gap (*ibid.*: 86). Anyhow, the European Commission has also recently published a report on the current situation of industrial relations in Europe that can serve as an additional source⁴⁰ (EC, 2013b).

In 2011 and 2012, 445 strikes were recorded (Katsoridas/Lampousaki, 2012: 90). Although in 2011 the majority of strikes took place in the private sector, they were limited to large companies, that comprise the minority of the private economy⁴¹ (*ibid.*: 91). Apart from regular work stoppages, a variety of forms of industrial actions were observed, including 200 strikes of 24 hours and 84 strikes of 48 hours, 53 short and long-term occupations of workplaces, ministries and state institutions⁴², as well as picketing in order to blockade the functioning of a company or evacuation of machines, and finally, four nation-wide general strikes (*ibid.*). With these numbers Greece continues to be the front-runner of general strike rates in Europe (Hamann et al., 2012: 108). Accordingly, despite infinitesimal strike-funds, factionalism and low union-density in the micro-firm economy, workers in Greece were still able to put efforts into making use of structural power in the light of a general attack by the state and employers on unions' institutional power.

There are claims, however, that countrywide strikes are neither decided by the working class, nor are they connected to existing workers' struggles and do thus not express a peak of previous regional or branch strikes (Karyoti, 2012: 167). Finally it is claimed that those strikes were not put in place strategically and had a rather psychological function (*ibid.*). As one interviewed unionist formulated it: "What strategy? There was no strategy at all! These strikes [...] were done in a way with the result to weaken us" (I3: 859-861). She explains the disempowering effect with "this manner of scattered 24-hour-strikes that were diffusing, that on the bottom line exhausted the pioneering part that always participated" (I3: 854-856). The diagnosis of an apparent

⁴⁰ According to the European Commission between June 2011 and April 2012 in Greece there were "838 strikes, including 46 general strikes, of which 30 were in the public sector" (EC, 2013b: 152).

⁴¹ As in Greece union members are more likely to be found in large companies, this finding is consistent with the previously mentioned assumption, that structural power will probably emerge, where associated power has been established.

⁴² Resulting in several repeated temporal paralyses of the state mechanism (*ibid.* 99).

lack of a general consistent strategy of responding to the attacks on labor was also the principal and over-riding conclusion of one analysis of the current situation of Greek trade unions (Kapsalis, 2012: 16).

The lack of strategy is seen in specific patterns of the general strikes. These actions were either announced months before, leaving sufficient time for the state to prepare, or they were announced just one day before, thus leading to low participation rates, as there was not much time for unions to mobilize (Karyoti, 2012: 168). In addition, as strikes usually take place the same day (or shortly before), measures are taken in the parliament, unions lack time to really build up pressure, as the crucial decisions have already been taken when the strike takes place (*ibid.*). Isolated short-time strikes, not embedded into any long-term strategy were not capable of gradually building up escalating pressure leading to a specific goal. General strikes thus had the long-term effect of spreading a demotivating sense of futility, as participants repeatedly invested a great amount of energy for actions that did not seem to lead anywhere. As many workers doubt that these arbitrary strikes could lead to any forms of concessions, they are often perceived not as effective tactics, but as mere “bulwarks against the general discontent” (Karyoti, 2012: 168). According to the research group ‘Strategic Unionism’, the point is to not use strikes arbitrarily, but to apply it in a purposeful way, in order to effectively represent workers’ interests (ASU, 2013: 308). Apparently, exactly this was *not* done by trade union bureaucracy with respect to the general strikes.

5.2 Left-Wing Impulses for Renewal

The past several years have witnessed the emergence of new types of grassroots unions independent from political parties, committed to principles of direct democracy and transparency that try to organize workers in the private economy.⁴³

One example of a labor union of this kind is the ‘Association of Employees in Book and Paper of Attica⁴⁴’, which has been examined by Kretsos (2011). It is a primary level

⁴³ A strategic initiative to rebuild radical unionism was taken in 1999 with the formation of PAME (All Workers Militant Front) as a reaction to the consensus-oriented policy of GSEE/ADEDY towards the state and employers. While the examination of PAME can be worth an entire own research project, due to the lack of internal democracy and lack of autonomy this particular coordination of trade unions dominated by the communist party faction will not be further examined here, as it perpetuates some of the deficiencies identified in the previous sections.

branch union based in Athens that addresses workers in bookshops, publishing houses, wholesale storages for books, copy-shops, stationery shops and wholesale storages of stationeries⁴⁵(I4: 45-47). BOPU is “characterized by a rotation system in the leadership; economic independency; and grassroots mobilization strategies“ (Kretsos, 2011: 279).

The union makes use of societal power by bringing together social movements with the trade union, by organizing political debates and protests with broader social demands (ibid.: 273). Eventually these capacities translated into institutional power, as prior to labor reforms, BOPU was able to sign a quite successful collective agreement even under harsh external conditions (ibid.: 275). Yet, Kretsos ignores the trade union reality of factionalism in Greece. By excluding this important characteristic of unionism from his analysis, he also underestimates the important contribution of BOPU to overcoming this, as leadership is not fragmented by factions (I4: 37-38). I will go into more detail on this aspect in the subsequent section.

According to other recent accounts of Greek unionism, the development of many grassroots initiatives to rebuild the trade union movement are increasingly observable (Kapsalis, 2012: 15). These include: Labor groups and workers’ collectivities, diverse factions of the broader left that are not led by one specific party but consist of different progressive currents, aiming at radicalizing the leadership of primary level unions (ibid.: 22). There is an increased tendency to establish new trade unions that are class-conscious and try to operate on the basis of direct democratic principles without bureaucrats and professional leadership⁴⁶ (Kapsalis, 2012: 24). There are also initiatives of autonomous networks with the aim to overcome the enduring flaws of trade unionism at the top levels of organization (ibid.: 22).

All these new – self-organized, autonomous, but often ideologically competitive – initiatives aim at filling the gaps and weaknesses that result from chronic

⁴⁴ Also referred to as BOPU or bookworkers

⁴⁵ A unique specificity of BOPU is that membership “covers more than 20 professions including employees doing manual and non-manual work, such as book sales people in bookstores, stationer shops and warehouses, editors, accountants and cleaning workers” (Kretsos, 2011: 279). This is especially important in a context of high fragmentation of the labor movement through organizational divisions by occupation. In this way BOPU achieves greater cohesion and additionally increases its associated power, as more members can be included.

⁴⁶ However, these new trade unions are still very small compared to the high amount of unorganized workers (Karyoti, 2012: 167).

disfunctionalities of trade unions, the internal divisions of the labor movement and the recent de-institutionalization of trade union rights (ibid.).

5.3 The Strategy towards Self-Organization

One commonly shared assumption underlying the strategies of all interviewed grassroots unionists is that Greek trade unions do not have power due to errors of labor bureaucracy. As a corrective force intervening in these deficiencies, all grassroots unionists try to increase associated power by addressing the participatory dimension through mobilization and activation of workers in assemblies run by employees in a workplace or union.

There is an internal clash of the labor movement though when it comes to the strategy leading to the goal of self-organization. Can this be achieved by shifting the power balances within trade union bureaucracy? Or is this not possible with the existing structures? Are alternative organizational forms thus required? The bottom line of autonomous unionism is that empowering structures will automatically lead to increased activity by the workers. The other grassroots unionists claim that workers have to be mobilized in order to collectively fight for a reform of prevailing organizational forms. Yet, autonomous unionists doubt that this inner-union mobilization for change is possible in most unions controlled by party-factions.

The conventional procedure of decision-making in Greek trade unions puts the administrative council consisting of elected factions at the center stage of decision-making (I3: 54). Among those unions putting efforts in democratization, the power of the administrative council is reduced in favor of increased involvement opportunities of the general assembly open to all members of the union. This means that the “decisions come out of general assemblies” (I3: 18) according to the primary school teacher. The administrative council still also takes decisions though (I3: 20). Notwithstanding, decisions by the general assembly bind the administrative council (I3: 48-49). This reduces the distance between leadership and the rank-and-file members and allows for more membership participation, as before the administrative council took most of the decisions alone. The interviewee claims that “this is not the basic principle of trade unions here in Greece” (I3: 53) but that her union only achieved this organizational

change after large internal fights. Increasing the role of the general assembly is clearly a sign of trade union renewal, compared to conventional unionism.

The book and paper workers' union has also put the general assembly at the center of its functioning (I4: 49-51), yet to an even larger extent. What differs from the previous example according to the interviewed member is that "there is a reality of self-abolition of the admin-council, functioning with a weekly assembly of action that has a coordinating character between the general assemblies" (I4: 12-15). According to the interviewed bookworker the principles expressed in the statute require "that we have to function based on assemblies, with direct democracy, that the administrative council has to play a coordinating character. Not to take decisions, but to realize the decisions of the assembly" (I4: 40-42). "In practice", he adds "even this has been overcome [...] Those who are there, discuss" (I4: 58-64). Accordingly, the day-to-day union work is being run by the active rank-and-file members that participate at the weekly assemblies, independently of their formal position, whether they are elected representatives or not. The weekly assembly is thus a substitute for full-time union officials. The same holds true in the case of the workers of Vio.Me who always take all decisions collectively without making use of the institutions of the council or the president. "Whatever happens, the smallest thing has to be decided by all together" (I2: 15-16)⁴⁷.

The book and paper union also aims at making the role of the president obsolete, as "everyone has to candidate, everyone has to go through the position of the president, so that the role of the president does not matter anymore" (I4: 80-81). The position of the president of the respective trade union is filled based on a rotational logic (I4: 68).

BOPU is still part of the GSEE structures though (I4: 616). Thus this union comprises a type between the old (conventional) and the new (grassroots) forms of unions. The reason for not separating from the given structures of unionism had been the ability to sign a collective agreement when being part of the official federation on the secondary level. This allows the access to institutional power that would otherwise be missing. Yet, as "today the agreements have dissolved and we cannot pressure the employers for the

⁴⁷ Direct democracy is easier the smaller the group though. It should be noted, that Vio.Me consists of only 38 workers (I2: 309), BOPU has fallen from 246 in 2007 to 187 in 2013 (I4: 93-96), while the teachers' union in contrast has 1,200 affiliates (I3: 11). Thus the appropriate decision-making structure also depends on the size of an organization.

agreement” (I4: 164-165), this particular advantage of being part of the overall structures is not given anymore. Hence the incentive for being part of GSEE has significantly lowered since the recent reform of the system of collective bargaining. A unionist of the counterpart of BOPU in Thessaloniki claims that:

“the unions we knew in the 80s that went to negotiate for instance for a collective agreement when there existed a table of negotiations where they sat with the boss [...] and say win two Euro more, allegedly they give something – crumbs – to the workers in order to justify their reason of existence. There is no reason for them to exist anymore. There is no table of negotiations. There is nothing” (I1: 400-408).

Consequently, the bargaining outcomes related to the former institutional power were perceived as the only source of legitimacy of dominant trade unionism. This is consistent with the analysis of trade union scholars claiming that the abrupt ending of consensual collective bargaining leads Greek trade unions to a crisis of effectiveness and resulting a crisis of credibility from a point of view of workers (Kapsalis, 2012: 9). The lost incentive to be part of the ‘unions of the old type’ though, has given impetus to the emergence of new unions that deprive themselves of the option of institutional power for the sake of more autonomy⁴⁸.

A part of the new grassroots unions has thus decided to not belong to GSEE even if this means that they are not eligible for collective bargaining. Still, they are confident in stating that “this at the moment in Greece in any case does not matter at all. It cannot be done anyhow since the abolition of branch agreements. Now you can’t sit on the table of negotiations. Even if you wanted to, you can’t do it. Thus, the obstacle is not that we don’t belong to the GSEE. It’s not the biggest problem” (I1: 574-584).

Autonomous grassroots unions have been formed for waiters and cooks, teachers in private education institutes, translators and lecturers, for precarious workers and the unemployed, couriers, cleaners, musicians and domestic workers (I4: 363-364). The

⁴⁸ “We want a trade union from below, that has no relation at all to bureaucratic leaderships” (I1: 499-500).

‘trade union of waiters, cooks and remaining workers in the sector of food’ was created in 2010 by a group of workers who decided not to organize within the existing union (II: 333-338). A member of this union explains the decision as follows:

“We chose to not participate in the food union that already existed, because this belonged to PAME, the faction of KKE and had a completely bureaucratic structure. It was controlled to such degree, that we considered as not reversible. It was not only controlled by absolute majorities, but almost all seats belonged to the faction. It did not do general assemblies. It operated totally with its admin-council. Since we have been established, I think during the last years folks have done a struggle in the opposite direction. But it did not even sign up colleagues without social security! Before the crisis in Greece they [without social security] comprised 85% of all workers. Now it is even 90% and above. Accordingly, we think that participating in this formation is also futile, meaning that we would never achieve to change the political power balances. Even and despite mobilization of the opposition, power balances have not changed” (II: 557-568).

Indeed, according to literature on informal work in Greece, undeclared employment is “a structural feature of the Greek economy” (Kretsos, 2004). The pre-crisis level was officially estimated not as high but at around 18-25% though (ibid.). The existence of an informal economy is seen as a threat to guaranteeing workers’ rights by trade unions and consequently they generally cooperate with the state in the fight against undeclared work (ibid.). Not representing the most vulnerable part of the working population, those without legal contracts, though not only hinders growth of associated power but might raise issues of legitimacy and representativeness in the eyes of workers, when one fourth of them belongs to that category. Accordingly, these new unions perceive themselves as an answer to the problem of unrepresented informal workers, as they make no distinction between officially employed persons and employees without social security.

6. Discussion of the Results

6.1 Structures, Mobilization and Organizing

From a perspective of the Power Resource Approach, the most promising strategy towards self-managed unionism would certainly include both mentioned aspects: empowering structures *and* mobilization of workers. The abolition of the faction system at all three levels of trade union bureaucracy is a necessary pre-requisite in order to overcome fragmentation and dependency relations to parties. This would not only lead to more inner cohesion and autonomy, but also to a higher degree of usage of structural power and increased associated power, as unions without control by parties would not be excluded. Based on the assumption that factionalism has seriously damaged social legitimacy of trade unions among workers, it would also strengthen societal power of labor in the wider public. Though in order not to run the risk of further fragmentation when pursuing this aim by separatism, and in order to not start with associated power close to zero (like the autonomous grassroots unions), this struggle against factionalism needs to be fought within the existing trade unions. Unions aiming at grassroots renewal ‘from within’ seem to only criticize governmental or party-factions, but do not question factionalism as such. For instance, even in trade unions where an independent faction has the majority of votes, like the primary school teachers’ union, this majority is not seen as a chance to overcome the entire faction-system by vote at least on the primary level of the individual union.

Democratizing structures, in order to be more appealing to workers, according to the interviewed unionists, is one part of the prevailing organizing strategy in Greece. The second part of the strategy is to mobilize them with frequent actions and more radical demands. Yet, what is common to these approaches is that, instead of carrying out offensive organizing campaigns, they address organizing new workers only *indirectly*. Moreover, there is the implicit expectation of pro-active workers who would contact the union out of their own initiative, when noticing its existence, for instance, through media or posters. In reality though, a worker does not approach the trade union or might not call it despite existing problems, because “he is afraid. The union might not even hear that a certain person has not received a wage for eleven months” (I3: 431-432). Yet, according

to Bronfenbrenner, the trade union has the responsibility “to counteract the fears and misinformation created by the employer” (Bronfenbrenner, 2003: 42) by approaching each worker on a person-to-person level.

According to research conducted repeatedly since the 1980s in the USA on “factors contributing to union organizing success” (Bronfenbrenner, 2003: 40), campaigns that “focused on indirect means of communication rather than on the personal contact and leadership development necessary to build the union and counteract the employer campaign” (ibid.: 42) were generally associated with low win rates. These traditional approaches are characterized by using “gate leafleting, mass meetings, and glossy mailings to contact unorganized workers” (ibid.: 41). In contrast, “campaigns where the union focused on person-to-person contact, house calls, and small-group meetings to develop leadership and union consciousness; inoculate workers against the employer’s anti-union strategy” (ibid.), and used escalating pressure tactics, had the highest membership increases and most of victories, even in the light of harsh anti-union campaigns by employers (Ibid.: 46).

Yet a strategy that *directly* aimed at organizing the unorganized could hardly be found in the research conducted in our case, despite explicit questions in that direction. The answers to the question on how new members are recruited ranged from reaching out via posters, flyers, articles, mailing-lists or blogs (I4: 85-93; 152), raising attention through activities and protests (I3: 161-165) to extending membership on many different occupations, as in the case of BOPU and to creating new unions in workplaces and areas without representation (I3: 388-391). It was witnessed that there is a difficulty of militant rank-and-file-members to directly talk to their colleagues individually and to bring them into the union (I3: 152-154).

The transferability of approaches that work in one country to a different industrial relations framework, however, can be questioned, as the appropriate strategy a trade union might follow, depends on the constellation of power resources and the socio-political and economic environment. These organizing campaigns started in the 1980s in the USA though, under a new industrial relations regime characterized by “employer hostility to unions, and rapid labor market deregulation, with particular emphasis on restricting the scope of union influence” (Fairbrother/Yates, 2003: 14). The recent

economic structural adjustment programs in Greece lead to a similar direction and create a comparably risky and vulnerable situation for workers and unionists.⁴⁹ The above presented model of organizing new workers is thus especially designed and accordingly prepared for workplaces dominated by the omnipresent fear of the employers' reaction to unionization. In contrast, trade unionists in Greece quite unsuccessfully still deploy traditional methods they were used to in times of more institutional power, practically not taking into account changed circumstances.

Whether the adaption of this approach to membership recruitment in Greece is probable or not, it must be noted, that systematically organizing new workers especially in the private sector should be a vested and highly prioritized interest of trade unions. Affiliation rates seemed to be the most important quality criterion used by the interviewees in order to assess the success of a specific type of trade union. The different kinds of unions (in terms of bureaucratization, democratization, factionalism etc.) were competitively compared based on the question: What union is capable of attracting the most workers? Yet, none of the unions seemed to have developed a specific strategy of directly approaching those workers they want to attract.

To conclude the assessment of strategies by the interviewed grassroots trade unionists, while most of the efforts are put into autonomy from parliamentary parties, membership participation and intervention in society, the essential objective of increasing the number of members was addressed only indirectly, thus insufficiently. Consequently, if Greek trade unions will not strategically put enormous efforts into organizing the unorganized, workers in Greece will very likely continue to lose influence and power.

6.2 Internal vs. External Factors of Labor Crisis and Renewal

The perceived existence of a bureaucracy detached from the rank-and-file leads a part of the interviewed workers to conclude, that renewed democratized structures, closing the gap to rank and file members are required, in order to rebuild unionism and to attract

⁴⁹ However, the main difference between Greece and the US regarding industrial relations is certainly that workers in the latter often deal with wealthy multinational corporations, while companies in Greece credibly use the argument that due to economic recession there is nothing to be gained from employers even by pressure, as there is claimed to be no money in general. Therefore, a trade union strategy must be also always based on knowledge of the objective economic conditions of each company.

more workers. However, two interviewees disagreed with this position, claiming that a restructuring will not lead to revitalization. The trade union researcher for instance claims that “many workers use this as an argument because they are afraid to unionize and they say ‘what can we do as long as they are factionalized, and how the unions are’ and so on. I thus don’t believe that if their structures would change, if they would not be factionalized, the participation in unions would increase to a large degree. It is the employers’ attacks...” (I5: 188-194). Although he explained how associated power of unions is directly influenced by factionalism, in terms of direct exclusion of primary level unions, but also the related disappointment by workers, he mainly relates crisis of unionism to external factors. The decreased structural power due to economic recession in combination with seriously declined institutional power due to structural adjustments of the economy and the labor market would in his view lead to a superior position of employers endowing them with more freedoms than before. Backed by new laws and regulations, employers can now easily dismiss workers, reduce wages and benefits and even withhold wages for months (I4: 97-98; 385-386; 425-426). This makes even politicized persons afraid to approach a union or to even become a member, and leads many workers to accept conditions they would never have accepted before (I4: 137-139; 278-282). From this perspective, it is heightened repression and the declined structural and institutional power that leads to lower associated power and not the other way around.

The widespread fear due to mass redundancies, high likelihood of unemployment and no chances of achieving a favorable collective agreement due to the new laws have been identified as reasons for a decline in participation even by workers in already democratized unions. For instance, the member of BOPU (Athens) describes how fear results in individualism, atomization, hopelessness and ultimately a loss of members due to the desire of the workers to avoid unnecessary exposure (cf. I4: 122-124⁵⁰; 166-167⁵¹). While these experiences can be perceived as a proof of the assumption that organizational

⁵⁰ “In the name of fear and insecurity they are in a logic of ,I can make it by myself, I shouldn’t expose myself, I should not open up to unionists and struggle stuff”

⁵¹ “Now [since the collective agreement does not exist anymore] to go to the union? Why? To expose myself?”. Here the unionist paraphrases the perceived attitude of many of his co-workers.

structures do not matter – as union membership seems to decline in all types of unions – it must be considered that the recession presents a very special context, making trade union work a difficult undertaking for any kind of labor organization. It could be argued though, that as trade unions did not try to develop workers' power and to exploit the power resources effectively in the first place, but to extend the power of factions, this made them vulnerable and unable to prepare, respond and fight adequately.

While this question cannot be answered with certainty, it is true that the identification of problems other than the internal structures of the labor movement is widespread among progressive unionists. For instance, the oppositional unionist in the food and tourism union also states:

“I don't believe that the causes of the crisis of the trade union movement are purely its structure. Its structure is also a problem, but not that the tertiary or the secondary, the GSEE or ADEDY are the problem. I thus disagree with this. It is mainly the politics, thus what policies trade unions have, if they are really instruments of workers' self-organization, that is literally mass workers' organizations, [...] and to what degree they can play the role that I perceive, beyond an economic fight and a struggle for a change of the authority. In my view, the main problem is on this level and not as much in the structure” (II: 488-497).

The quintessence of this statement is that although there are internal reasons for the crisis of labor, not the organizational structures matter, but the contents, the ideology and the policies of trade unions. He thus demands a more militant agency from part of unions. This question can be embedded into a structure-agency-debate, as it could be argued that the appropriate agency can only arise out of adequate structures. The problem is how to assess whether the existing structures do indeed facilitate and encourage the required agency or whether the structures have to first change in order to then allow the development of more participation and radicalization. Apparently, diverging experiences in this regard lead to contrary evaluations of the situation.

The position of the interviewee from INE is consistent with the claim that the problem is political and that unions should focus on broader goals. He thus demands a “general political strike. We rise up until the government falls, until there are elections, until the memorandum is abolished. Whatever you want. But the objective should be clearly political and should not only say no to dismissals” (5: 242-245). Accordingly, both the communist unionist and the INE-researcher demand unions to develop more discursive power. Being able to set broader socio-political goals and to organize strikes with specific political objectives implies having a competence of utopia and deploying narrative resources capable of mobilizing workers.

Concluding, whether the crisis of unionism is related to external factors only (e.g. employers’ attacks⁵²), to the political orientation of trade unions in demands and actions or also seen as a result of undemocratic internal structures, certainly influences the respective strategies perceived as most important for labor revitalization.

⁵² The opinion that the causes can be reduced to external factors *only* was not represented by any of the unionists.

7. Conclusion

The above research made clear that during the economic crisis chronic disfunctionalities of prevailing trade unionism came more clearly to the surface. Indicators of the crisis of trade unions are seen in low union density in the private sector, lack of union representation at the workplace level and the representation gap considering young, female, immigrant and precarious workers. The trade union bureaucracy is dominated by public sector unions and led by party-factions. Inner cohesion of the labor movement is shattered by the organizational divisions of public sector (ADEDY) and private sector (GSEE) workers, the high amount of parallel primary and secondary level organizations and finally but most importantly, by political fragmentation of the leadership at all levels mainly along party lines. Due to a union bureaucracy characterized especially at the secondary and tertiary level by financial dependence on the state and a lack of autonomy from governmental or parliamentary parties, attempts to strategically rebuild trade unionism in the name of unity and effectiveness are not initiated from the top. Indeed, active primary level unionists seem to be the driving force of labor renewal in Greece, as they set autonomous and self-organized initiatives in motion with the pronounced objective of overcoming long-lasting deficiencies of unionism. Some democratize their unions, by limiting the power of administrative councils; others even abolish the faction system. Some revitalize their unions through intervention in the leadership via militant factions, while others establish completely new autonomous unions organized in a federative manner. With these measures, they try to build structures and mobilize agency that will enhance the capacity and the willingness of workers to act, to participate and to develop power in their respective location in the market, as actors in society and as organization. Finally, they all try to coordinate and to organize struggles independently from the overall trade union bureaucracy, in order to achieve more cohesion, autonomy and thus effectiveness in their actions. While the question concerning the ways in which unionists *try* to overcome deficiencies of the labor bureaucracy could be answered to some extent, the open question that remains unanswered is to what degree they actually fulfill this objective and whether these changes are indeed empirically better capable of

building up power, compared to traditional unionism in Greece. As these attempts are relatively recent though, to evaluate successes and failures these questions can only be answered in future after sufficient time has passed. It could be generally seen though that grassroots renewal moves within the spectrum of democratization and radicalization and its agency finds itself torn in a tension between autonomous self-organization and internal pressure towards trade union leadership. These results can lay the grounds for further research.

Therefore, any strategy of building up trade union power should not only include an examination of the resources available to labor, but must also be based on an analysis of the situation of capital. A research of this kind would enable the identification of vulnerable spots of the employers' side, translating into potential pressure points that can be addressed by labor. As power describes not a thing, but a *relation* between two or more agents, trade union power and related strategic choices cannot be determined with certainty without the examination of employers' power as well. While this undertaking would certainly go beyond the scope of this paper, for further research it could be concluded that labor studies must also increasingly consider strategy, tactical choices of capital and its power resources if strategic opportunities of labor are to be identified.

Finally, some conclusions shall be drawn regarding the usefulness of the Power Resource Approach for purposes of labor revitalization studies. It has proved to be very helpful as a heuristic because it facilitated sensibilizing research attention for aspects that might otherwise have not been considered, such as cooperation power, discourse power or the capabilities necessary as a prerequisite in order to actually make use of different forms of power. As a theoretical model it helped analytically putting together information on Greek unionism by going beyond its conventional mostly descriptive delineations in academia. However, it should not be over-estimated as a complete theory. In order to become a theory it must be amended by more comprehensive assumptions on society in general, including the above-suggested analysis of the power of capital and a more profound theoretical lining of the relation of labor and capital.

Concluding, this research showed that revitalization of trade unions is not exclusively a process that necessarily has to be initiated from the top. Under the conditions of existential external threats, a politicized environment, a leadership perceived as not acting

in the most favorable way and structures not considered as enabling, innovative renewal activities are observable at the base of labor organizations. Many of the interviewees though were actually leaders. But they were not paid trade union officials or representatives detached from the base, as they did the same job as their co-workers. Yet, they were either members or presidents of the respective administrative council, or informally advanced initiatives and struggles.

Whether these minority tendencies will actually have a revitalizing impact on a broader part of the labor movement and whether they will thus be able to strengthen as a whole depends on their ability to overcome ideological disparities (and hence increase unity and cohesion) and on the degree to which they will put efforts to grow in numbers. Cohesion and growth will also determine their ability to gain autonomy, either by then being able to change power relations within the existing secondary and tertiary organizations or by having reached a sufficient size to be capable of separating from GSEE and ADEDY without losing effectiveness and strength. This is a long-term process though that cannot be predicted with certainty as its outcome is determined by many factors. It will in any case determine the future of working and living conditions of the wage-dependent population in Greece and the degree of democracy on a level of political decisions. Because the power and leverage of the trade union movement will resolve to what extent labor (thus the bulk of the population) will once again receive a voice in socio-economic planning of the country.

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