

The Trade Union Movement in Greece – Characteristics, Organisation, Prospects.¹

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1. In Place of an Introduction

Historically, the trade union movement in Greece has followed the development of the forces of production in Greece, which have lagged behind industrially developed Europe. Greece's first union created only in 1879, by the wood workers in the Syros shipyards, and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Greek trade union movement began to undergo more vigorous growth. The year 1914 saw the recognition of the first association, the legal form in which the unions still appear, and in October 1918 the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE) was established, as the culmination of struggles for organisational unity and coordination of the activity of the Greek trade union movement.²

From its establishment to date, the Greek trade union movement has been marked by the evolution of the country's political process; a direct result of this for many years were its efforts to survive and preserve its autonomy in the face of the wide variety of state interventions that were also associated with the irregular political and parliamentary life of Greece. Repeated attempts by the state authorities to control the unions were further strengthened during periods when dictatorships had been imposed, during the German occupation, during the civil war and in the post-civil war

¹ Based on the study of Mr G. Kouzis, "The characteristics of the Greek trade union movement – deviations and convergences with the European area, Gutenberg, 2007."

² G. Kouzis, The Trade Union Movement in Greece, Enimerossi, No. 122, November 2005.

years; this does not mean that during the period following the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 similar irregularities and behaviours by the authorities against the unions were not noted; the reason for this was that the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 was not accompanied by the resolution of the problems of the trade unions in Greece. This was achieved when Law 1264/82 was passed, which struck non-members off union registers, and when the GSEE conference was held in 1983. GSEE is the only private-sector union confederation in Greece, whose membership includes various ideological/political and trade union tendencies.

The delayed development of the forces of production in Greece and the attendant delay in the development of the trade union movement, in conjunction with its irregular development for a long time due to the general political climate, meant that the terms for its development differed from those of the respective trade union movements of the other countries of Europe.

2. Establishment, organisational structure and operation

The Greek unions have a legal personality, and in order to set up a union 21 members are needed, all of who sign the founding statutes, which, after being approved by court ruling, are published in the appropriate record books of the competent court *ratione materiae*.

Safeguarding of trade union freedom by the constitutional legislator emanated from its direct recognition for the first time by the Constitution of 1975 (Article 23, paragraph 1), where it is stated that “The state shall take the necessary measures to safeguard trade union freedom and the unimpeded exercise of the rights associated therewith against any prejudice to them within the meaning of the law.”

Alongside this, the right to organise collectively is also indirectly recognised in the provisions of Article 12 of the Constitution, where the right of association is laid down along with the freedom to form associations with a broader content and orientation.

The 1975 Constitution was the first constitutional text in the long history of Greek Constitutions that contained an express reference to the term work and the rights associated therewith. These include the right to work (Article 22, paragraph 1), the right to bargain collectively and conclude collective agreements (Article 2, paragraph

2), the right to organise collectively (Article 23, paragraph 1), and the right to strike (Article 2, paragraph 2). Until that time the terms of operation of the Greek unions were governed by specific laws emanating from the broader constitutional freedom of association, and the present-day structure of the trade unions is based on the legislation now in effect, i.e. Law 1264/1982 “regarding the democratisation of the trade union movement.”

This legislation is in harmony with the spirit of the constitutional legislator; it develops trade union freedoms and safeguards trade unionism in enterprises. In parallel, through specific regulations it contributes to the democratisation of the terms of operation of the unions (e.g. election processes, etc.). This statutory framework was instrumental in the modernisation of the unions and the creation of the conditions for their more meaningful intervention in the arena of industrial relations. At the same time, trade union rights were also strengthened by Greece’s ratification of International Labour Conventions 87, 98, 135, etc.

The Greek trade union movement is organised on the basis of employment status. Thus workers in a private-law relationship (private and broader public sector) are organised in the Greek General Confederation of Labour (GSEE), and public servants (narrow public sector) are organised in the Confederation of Public Servants (ADEDY).

More specifically, the organisational structure of the Greek trade union organisations includes the following forms of representation, which form a pyramid, linking the rank-and-file unions with the supreme union organisations at the apex.

a) **Primary trade union organisations** consisting of the rank-and-file unions, which may be created on the following levels:

- Enterprise (enterprise-level unions), whose members are employed by one specific enterprise. The number of enterprise-level unions in Greece is very low, due to the preponderance of small enterprises (97% of enterprises in the private sector have fewer than 20 employees, and thus cannot be unionised). One result of this distinctive feature is that enterprise-level unions are only created in large enterprises (usually those employing more than 100 people).

- Sector of economic activity (sectoral trade union organisations), whose members are employed in enterprises of the same type in the same sector (e.g. Piraeus metalworkers' union).
- Occupation or occupational category (occupation-based trade union organisations): a distinctive feature of their members is that they perform a specific occupation, irrespective of the type of enterprise or sector in which they are employed (e.g. Athens accountants' union).

The number of primary trade union organisations in Greece is considered to be quite large (2,400 are represented by GSEE and 1,300 by ADEDY). These numbers are characteristic of the fragmentation of union forces. To be sure, this fragmentation is not limited to the primary unions, but also extends to the second-level trade union organisations.³

b) **Second-level organisations**, which are created by two or more primary organisations, can be divided into the following categories:

- The organisations that are vertical by grades include the Federations, which relate mainly to the level of sector of economic activity (e.g. nationwide federation of workers in the metalworking industry). They are also created both on the basis of occupation (e.g. Panhellenic Federation of Accountants), and on the enterprise level, as in the large public enterprises (e.g. General Federation of Employees in the Public Power Corporation), where they include many primary occupation-based unions. The federations are part of the organisational structure both of GSEE and of ADEDY, where they number 62 and 45 respectively.
- In the horizontal structure we can distinguish the **Labour Centres**, which are encountered only in the structure of GSEE (and number 3). They gather together the primary unions operating on the local level, irrespective of whether they are organised on the basis of enterprise, sector or occupation; one example is the Thessaloniki Labour Centre.

³ G. Kouzis, The Trade Union Movement in Greece, Enimerossi, No. 122, November 2005.

c) **Third-level organisations**, which are the supreme trade union institutions and are created by two or more second-level organisations. In Greece we have two big third-level organisations, GSEE and ADEDY.

In accordance with the collective bargaining system in Greece (Law 1876/1990), the trade union organisation is the sole body representing workers in the collective bargaining leading up to the conclusion of collective labour agreements, and the only body competent *ratione materiae* to sign them.

In Greece the trade union movement is characterised by the presence of a large number of trade union organisations of all grades (fragmentation), since there exist in the public and private sector around 180 second-level and around 3,700 primary unions.⁴

The adverse consequences of the fragmentation of forces in the Greek trade union movement have from time to time been of concern to the unions themselves, in fact to such an extent that they have held conferences (1989, 2003) on the exclusive subject of their organisational restructuring. The decisions taken at these conferences were aimed at combating the phenomenon of fragmentation by creating a single union at the enterprise level, one federation at the sectoral level, and one labour centre at the level of the prefecture, in parallel with the gradual abolition of the occupation-based organisations, a form of organisation that fails to meet present-day requirements. But even though since 1989 the objective has been to create 21 sectoral federations in the framework of GSEE, this objective has not yet been met.

The reasons for the fragmentation of the unions lie mainly in their traditional occupation-based structure, which is conducive to such fragmentation.

One particular feature of the trade union movement in Greece is the integrated system of organisational expression, which embraces all the different ideological and political tendencies and in parallel is differentiated organisationally on the basis of employment status⁵. Thus, whereas the single form of organisation in which a variety

⁴ G. Kouzis, The Trade Union Movement in Greece, Enimerossi, No. 122, November 2005.

⁵ G. Kouzis, The characteristics of the Greek trade union movement – deviations and convergences with the European area, Gutenberg, 2007.

of ideological tendencies coexist has been adopted; the unions in Greece are divided into two large categories depending on the employment status of the employees they represent. People in private-law employment relationships (in the private and broader public sector, including public utilities and services (DEKO), local authorities (OTA) and state banks, are represented by GSEE, and people in public-law employment relationships, such as public servants, are represented by ADEDY. Therefore the coexistence of various ideological tendencies in the same organisational structure does not mean there is also an integrated organisational expression of the trade union movement, since the various tendencies coexist in a single organisation, but depend on specific employment status, a fact that has led to the creation of the two supreme Greek trade union organisations.

The organisational unity of the Greek trade union movement, which stems from the coexistence of the various ideological and political tendencies and currents within the same union, is also combined with the presence of the trade union factions within the organisations.

Regarded as a characteristic feature of the factions is the fact that they have close interconnections with specific political parties, and do not merely have certain ideological roots. And not coincidentally, the creation of a new political party almost always entails the creation of a corresponding trade union faction.

The concept of the autonomy of the unions and their freedom from outside influences is directly connected with their traditional lack of economic independence. The state subsidy paid through the Workers' Welfare Foundation, a scheme supervised by the Ministry of Employment and Social Protection, which collects funds from all paid employees (both union and non-union members) as well as from employers for the primary purpose of providing social services to employees, is the basic source of funding for the unions since in effect union dues play a part only in the public-sector unions.

Based on the legislation, the unions in Greece maintain exclusivity from the side of labour in exercising the right to bargain collectively, sign collective labour agreements, or call strikes, which may take place only on the initiative of a lawfully established trade union.

In the last 15 years we have seen a mix of trade union strategy and action concentrated in the antagonistic and negotiatory nature of the relations between the

unions and the employers. In this context, the law passed on collective bargaining (Law 1876/90) introduced the obligation of the employer to bargain, and at the same time created new systems of crisis management (mediation while retaining arbitration on new terms). In addition, the creation of the Economic and Social Council in 1994 reinforced the presence of social dialogue institutions. In parallel, during the '90s a broader framework for consensus between state, unions and employers was created, in view of Greece's inclusion in EMU.

However, this framework is usually violated by public policies and companies' decisions, resulting in union retaliation through strikes against privatisations of public enterprises, against disruptive social insurance and industrial relations interventions, against fiscal and incomes policy characterised by taxation of employees and pensioners as well as by the weakening of the purchasing power of available income through increased inflation and rising prices, and finally against ineffective policies to reduce unemployment, since to some extent unemployment is being reduced by increasing flexible forms of employment (temporary, part-time and seasonal, with employment contracts for fixed terms of 7-12 months).

Finally, as regards the presence of other forms of worker representation in enterprises and their relation to the unions, we should point out the following:

In Greece there is a functional system of works councils and health and safety committees, which are institutions for employee participation in enterprises.

Law 1767/88 introduced the works councils. They may be created on certain conditions in enterprises with over 50 employees, and where there is no enterprise-level union in enterprises with over 20 employees. All workers elect them and their competencies are mainly advisory, although on some issues (e.g. staff rules) they have the right of co decision. However, they have an extremely limited presence, and in effect they have not developed as an institution.

Law 1568/85 created workplace health and safety committees; they refer to companies with more than 150 employees, and wherever works councils exist their members appoint representatives on health and safety issues. In all other smaller companies the system of health and safety representative applies. However, the practical application of both these systems is particularly limited.

3. Union density

Union density, i.e. the rate of worker participation in the trade union organisations, calculated on the basis of the participation of their members in procedures to elect representatives, as indicated by the most recent conferences of the two supreme trade union organisations, GSEE and ADEDY, has been determined to be around 28% (739,629 union members out of a total of 2,635,832 employees, the average number in paid employment for the years 2002-2004⁶ when elections were held to nominate delegates to the conferences of both organisations).⁷

This rate of union membership in Greece (around 30%) is low compared to the rest of Europe, and appears to impede role of the trade union movement, especially in conjunction with the overall rate of paid employment in Greece, which represents only 63% of total employment in the country.

The Greek case is linked with the overall downward trend in union density in the rest of the world: union density has fallen by 12 percentage points in the last 15 years, although today the number of union members is the same as it was in 1990. This means that any increase in union membership over the last seven years cannot keep pace with the rates of increase of employment as they are revealed in the new sectors of activity (e.g. new services, flexibility, temporary and part-time employment, etc.), among women and young people, where the estimated rate of union membership stands at one-digit figures.

These estimates are based on the number of members voting in individual union elections, rather than on the number of paid-up union members, since the system of union dues does not function effectively, and in the private sector in particular it is purely symbolic in nature. In addition, the number of registered union members is not reliable for drawing any conclusions on the rate of union density, since the trade union organisations do not regularly strike non-members off their rolls.

⁶ This number does not include unionised employees of the security forces who are not represented by ADEDY, nor does it include non-unionised military personnel.

⁷ G. Kouzis, The characteristics of the Greek trade union movement – deviations and convergences with the European area, Gutenberg, 2007.

More specifically, and as regards union density in Greece, the level of union membership is substantially different between the private and public sectors. In the private sector, the rate of union membership does not appear to be higher than 18% (around 327,000 workers, on the basis of 2004 data).

By contrast, the number of union members among public sector employees (both in public- and private-law relationships) is calculated at 414,000 and represents around 60% of employment in the public sector,⁸ whereas in certain areas it verges on 90% (e.g. state banks and enterprises).

It has been estimated that 56% of all union members are employed in the public sector. More specifically, public servants show a rate of union membership of around 51%, whereas the total rate in the public sector (narrow and broader) has been calculated at 60%.

Thus although the private sector has almost twice as many employees as the public sector, the public sector is clearly in the lead with the absolute majority (56%) of all members of the unions in GSEE and ADEDY.⁹

A comparison of levels of union membership among employees in a position of subordination under private law (represented by GSEE) and public servants (represented by ADEDY) gives the following picture for the 1983-2004 period: Union density in unions represented by GSEE fell from 43% to 32% (from 571,000 to 450,000 members), whereas in unions represented by ADEDY it showed a significant increase, from 27% to 55% (from 96,000 to 289,000 members).

The reasons for the strong difference between the private and the public sector are obvious. On the one hand, the traditional unfriendly attitude of the employers towards the concept of union membership and the attendant cautious position of workers vis-à-vis union membership (since joining a union is regarded by most employers as a

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⁹ G. Kouzis, *The characteristics of the Greek trade union movement – deviations and convergences with the European area*, Gutenberg, 2007.

negative move) are basic factors limiting the development of trade unionism in the private sector.

Furthermore, the fact that the private sector is dominated by small enterprises (97% have fewer than 20 employees) has a negative effect on workers' joining the unions, which are objectively favoured by bigger concentrations of workers, particularly when there is no possibility of union representation in the small enterprises.

By contrast, the public sector has always displayed a high rate of unionisation. The main causes of this phenomenon are centred around the security felt by employees in the narrow and broader public sector, where union membership entails no adverse consequences.

The high union density in the public sector, compared to the situation prevailing in the private sector, is yet another characteristic element of the Greek trade union movement, which sets it apart from the situation in the rest of the world, where the gap in union density between the two sectors of economic activity is not so wide. However, the downsizing of the public sector and the step-up in privatisations have had a very substantial effect on the total magnitude of trade union membership in Greece, an element which has already become clear from its evolution to date.

4. In Place of an Afterward

The present-day characteristics and developments of the trade union movement in Greece, in conjunction with the changes taking place in the system of production and work organisation, have brought about a transformation of the unified paid employment of the Fordian model of production into the individualised paid employment of the post-Fordian model of production.

In this context the question that arises is whether the increase in flexible forms of employment and the model of individualised work will influence union density and the strategy for attracting new members to the unions.

Thus, in working towards a new strategy to attract new members in order to increase the level of union density in Greece, the unions must:

- a. On the level of employment, opt for steady, secure employment, which among other things reinforces the unified productive operation of paid employment and its collectively represented action.
- b. On the organisational/operational level, bring together in strong trade union organisations (integrated trade union complexes) on the geographical and

sectoral level the fragmented organisation of paid employment through the use of electronic technology, among other things.

- c. Promote their internationalisation and interconnection with the other international and European social organisations and movements.
- d. Include in their strategy and action victims of exclusion, unemployed people and long-term unemployed in particular, and unskilled workers, the main objective being their effective integration in the labour market.

Thus the answer to the question of how to increase union density in Greece focuses on the necessity of creating and developing strong, integrated unions on the regional and sectoral level, which will also attract and collectively represent individualised work and workers in flexible forms of employment.