

# **Grassroots unionism in *the retail sector*: A comparison between Greece and Poland**

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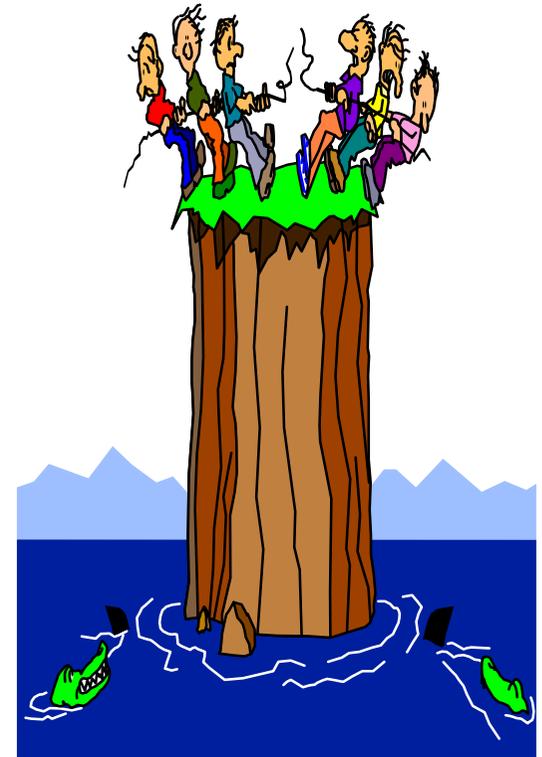
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# Unionism: Surviving with the sharks...

- Persistent and long unemployment
- Growth in contingent employment
- Unwillingness of the national governments to absorb the social costs of economic turbulence
- Growing emergence of a low wage service sector
- Balance of power in favour of employers



# Unionisation of young precarious workers and union militancy: Greece and Poland

1. **Can radical/ militant unions be an answer to the unionisation problems of young precarious workers?**
2. **Can we compare union militancy across different countries?**
  - Comparison between Greece and Poland / retail industry;
  - Two different examples of trade union militancy:
    - i) Greece – radical political unions;
    - ii) Poland – radical organising at the workplace



## ***Is there is an unsatisfied demand for unions by young workers?***

### **D' Art and Turner' s (2008):**

The necessity for unions has apparently increased over the period between 1984-2003.

Only 12% of the sample disagreed with the belief that unions are necessary.

Women and **younger** workers who are one of the most vulnerable and contingent segments of the workforce were more like likely to perceived a need for unions.

The need of unions is observed to be higher in the Mediterranean countries. More specifically, **Greece** has the highest proportion (89%) across the EU-15 area with Portugal (85%), France (80%), Spain (79%) and Italy (77%) to follow.

### **Altieri and Carrieri (2000):**

High demand for unionization among atypical workers in Italy

### **Macias (2003)**

Temporary workers in Spain have more positive attitudes towards unionism than those of stable employees

### **Kretsos, (2011); Murgia and Selmi, (2011):**

Growing trend of social movement unionism, especially in Greece and to some extent in Italy, that seems to address better the needs of certain groups of the young workforce

In **Poland** (in 2010), 49% of interviewees supported the view that the current role of trade unions in governing the country is too little (**Public Opinion Research Centre report, BS/109/2010**)

## Explaining Low Youth Density – explanations

1. Attitudinal (young people are more antipathetic to trade unions and more individualistic than previous generations)
2. Structural factors (characteristics of youth employment, limited opportunities of young people to unionise)
3. Union specific reasons (union inefficiencies in terms of recruitment strategies, deficits in internal union democracy, gerontocracy on leadership and the decision making process)
4. CEE – ideational legacy, partially overlapping with (1) (trade unions considered to be an idea stemming from the state socialist past and anti-communist resistance that does not fit into the present, market reality)

# Labour Market Segmentation, de-standardization of employment and Unionism

- Impact on the attitudes of workers towards the unions (outsiders vs insiders, two-tier workforce).
- Union organizing efforts more expensive - Union presence in individual workplaces.
- Impact on the balance of power between employers and employees
- Increased employers' hostility and resistance to unionism.



# The new promise

- Unions are responsible for their future and their destiny to a certain extent (Frege & Kelly, 2003)
  - Unions have to enlarge their playing field (Wever, 1997)
  - Need of a more strategic combination of grass-roots mobilisation, coalition building with broader social movements and political organisations (Milkman and Voss, 2004; Fantasia and Voss, 2004; Holgate, 2005)
  - Dramatic potential contribution of the internet to Union Growth (Lucio 2000, Diamond & Freeman 2002, Lucio & Walker)
  - New identities that bypass national borders (Meardi, 2009)
  - Direct action – militancy (Darlington, 1997 and 2001)
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- Each national setting provides a certain set of strategic options to unions resulting in turn in different reactions and outcomes.

# Poland & Greece compared

## – core variables -

- **Union power** (Levesque & Murray 2010) – and consequently – union abilities to include young precarious workers depend on
  - **Union resources** & union capabilities to make use of them
  - **Institutional arrangements**
  - **Opportunity structure**

# Union power resources: constraints & opportunities

	GREECE	POLAND
<b>Internal solidarity</b> (collective cohesion and deliberative vitality)	Organisational unity, but dramatic divergence and political dispute among different union fractions. Little evidence of internal divisions, but serious strains on the social compromise of state unionism and social democratic consensus after the economic crisis upsurge (Kretsos, 2011)	High union fragmentation (Gardawski et al 2012); Entrenched elitism (Korkut, 2008); Segmented unionism (Mrozowicki 2012) versus new grassroots unionism and company-level trade union organising
<b>Network embeddedness</b> (horizontal and vertical links with other unions, community groups SM)	Emergence of strong social and civil rights movements not only in the urban areas (more politicized movements). Localized responses and national level social unrest and anomie	Weakness of social movement and political unionism. (Shylk 2009; Ost 2009)
<b>Narrative resources</b> (the existing stock of stories that frame understandings and union actions and inform a sense of efficacy and legitimacy)	Long lasting legacy of union militancy and industrial unrest versus the myth of European integration and economic modernization.	Traditions of trade union militancy in the past (Touraine et al. 1983) versus the myth of the market & social dialogue /illusory corporatism discourses
<b>Infrastructural resources</b> (material and human resources and their allocation through processes, policies and programmes)	Resources controlled by union bureaucracies and government decisions (partnerships for greater access to funding for training). Ageing membership effects in traditional sectors and new generation of union activists in services	Limited infrastructural resources; ageing (Gardawski et al. 2012) versus new generation of union activists (Krzywdzinski 2010)

# Institutional arrangements

	GREECE	POLAND
Trade union density	24%	15%
Collective bargaining system	<b>Centralised</b> , but adversarial industrial relations system and social democratic unionism	<b>Decentralised Illusory corporatism / tripartism</b>
Collective bargaining coverage	100% (national agreement)	20-25%
Precarious workers in the labour market	Difficult to estimate, as precarious employment is too widespread (esp for young)	27% employees fixed term contracts 800 000: freelance contracts About 1 million people: no contracts (hidden economy)
Union access to young precarious workers	<p><b><u>Very limited:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Legal context</b> – (a) only employees can be TU members (exclusion of the most non-standard contracts); (b) minimum membership threshold to establish a union – <b>21</b> employees</li> <li>- Labour law violation</li> <li>- <b>Employer hostility</b></li> <li>- Collective bargaining (ambivalent in nature sometimes)</li> <li>- Strained lobbying with dominant political parties</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Limited:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Legal context</b> – (a) only employees can be TU members (exclusion of the most non-standard contracts); (b) minimum membership threshold to establish a union – <b>10</b> employees</li> <li>- <b>Employer hostility</b></li> <li>- <b>Very limited number of sectoral collective agreements</b></li> <li>- <b>By-passing minimum wage</b> by non-standard work &amp; decreasing influence on minimum wage via Tripartite mechanism</li> </ul>

# Opportunity structure

- Is radical & radicalised trade unionism a solution?

*“conditions for the development of radical alternatives exist where there is **little institutional support** for trade unions (as in much of the global South), or where the **traditional supportive institutional infrastructure is decomposing or withdrawn** (as in some parts of the global North)”*  
(Upchurch et al. 2011)



# The types of radical unionism

## Radical political unionism

### Upchurch et al. (2011):

-political discourse of anti-neoliberalism

*We use the term 'radical' to denote a political stance that opposes both hard-line (neo) and softer (social) versions of liberalism while recognizing the diversity and breadth of the ideological bases of this opposition"*

-shift away from social-democratic consensus

**Forms:** new organisational forms and coalitions (social movement unionism, community unionism)

**Leverage upon precarious workers:** through political actions and politically driven mobilisation both within and beyond workplace

## Militant unionism

### Kelly (1996):

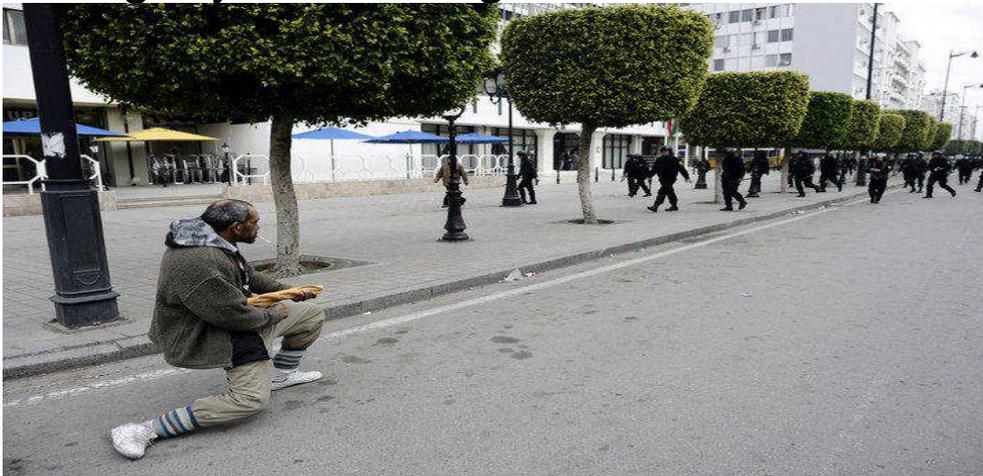
- goals: ambitious demands
- membership: reliance on mobilisation
- institutional resources: reliance on collective bargaining
- methods: frequent threat or use of industrial action
- ideology: ideology of conflicting interests

**Forms:** Traditional workplace-/occupation-based unionism

**Leverage upon precarious workers:** via collective bargaining and industrial actions

# Sources of trade union radicalisation in Greece

- **Before the crisis:** highly structured and collectivised but still many workers excluded from collective bargaining coverage and union protection
- High levels of undeclared work and violation of labour law/ Social Inequality!!!
- The debate on the lost generation of 700€ → 600€ → 500€ (Athens riots 2008)
- A new generation of activist and left-wing/ anarchists groups at universities
- Strong historical legacy of militancy and social unrest
- **After the crisis:** Competition between big trade unions and Social Movements and new social actors (?)
- Militant trade union leadership/ break of consensus with 'socialist party'
- Widespread legitimization crisis of the political system and humanitarian tragedy in working class suburbs



## Forms of trade union radicalisation in Greece

- 44% of all general strikes across Europe (1980-2008)
- Ideologically driven **radical political unionism**
  - against social-democratic large trade unions/ internal divisions
- Emergence of Social Movement Unionism/ Community Unionism in big urban areas
- Social networks and blogs, E-ACTIVISM



# Radicalised unionism in Poland



**DOŁĄCZ DO NAS!**



*Your freedom is the slavery of others  
stop for the trade on Sunday*

**HIPER WYZYSK**  
SPOŁECZNY MONITORING HANDLU  
*Hyper-exploitation: Social monitoring of the  
retail (NSZZ Solidarnosc-based webpage)*

# Sources of union radicalisation in Poland

- **Grassroots worker pressure on trade unions** motivated by (a) very low wages; (b) harsh working conditions
- **Growing disillusionment with neo-corporatism** (especially under the Civic Platform government, Platforma Obywatelska)
- **Disenchantment of the market** – “junk contracts” debate
- Long-term effects of the US-style **trade union organising campaigns** – new generation of trade union activists promoting change within trade union structures
- **Competitive union pluralism** – trade unions competing for a limited number of workers in unionised companies

# Forms of union radicalisation in Poland

- **New workplace-level bread-and-butter militancy** in the public sector and new private companies (e.g. hypermarkets) – both *within* large TUs and new small TUs
- **New militant occupation-based trade unions** in the public sector e.g. the Nationwide Trade Union of Midwives and Nurses
- **Radicalisation of large confederations** (NSZZ Solidarnosc, OPZZ) and their affiliates – termination of party alliances; focus on street protests and legal actions to **increase of minimum wage** and against the **pension system reforms (2010-2012)**
- **New radical (left-wing) political unions** (e.g. *Free Trade Union August '80, OZZ IP*)

## Exploring the outcomes

– unionisation of precarious workers in the retail sector -

- Methodology:

- **Expert interviews** with sectoral trade union leaders and (where applicable) trade union organisers (at least 1 mainstream TU and 1 non-mainstream TU)
- **Case studies** of the companies (4 in Poland; 4 in Greece) – hypermarkets - involving secondary data and **biographical interviews with union leaders** (12 in Poland, 12 in Greece)
- Secondary data (e.g. Eurostat, EIRO reports etc.)

# Sector level context and union actions

	Greece	Poland
Employment (Commerce sector – EIRO) and its share in total employment	828,200 (2009) 772,854 (2011) 18%	2,325,900 (2008)  15%
Wages (as compared to national average, retail sector only, EIRO)	86% (2011)	66% (2009)
Union density - EIRO	12,5%	1%
Union membership growth	OIYE (downward trends) ↓	NSZZ ‘S’ Commerce Section (increasing trends) ↑
Sectoral collective agreement	Yes (at great risk due to recent legislation)	No
Company level collective agreements	Very few (exceptions to the rule)	Very few ‘cooperation agreements’ + collective agreement in old shops (Spolem)
TU organising	No, but before 2010 small unions with community characteristics and grassroots activism	Yes, <b>comprehensive</b> , Union Development Office of NSZZ Solidarnosc + <b>grass roots</b> in the case of Free Trade Union August ‘80
Actions targeting young precarious workers	<b>Not existent</b>	<b>Limited:</b> mostly new media campaigns (e.g. Hyper-exploitation – a webpage to make a claims against employers) + direct organising at the workplace + actions for minimum wage
The cases of radicalisation	Very few number of blockages and occupations of shop premises because of unfair and unlawful redundancies	First strike in hypermarkets: 2008 (by <i>Free Trade Union August ‘80</i> ) Blockage of distribution centres in

# Company-level developments - PL

- new grassroots union activists in the retail sector – NSZZ Solidarnosc, Confederation of Labour, Free Trade Union August '80
  - “social milieu” of young trade union organisers in NSZZ Solidarnosc
  - focus on the reinforcement of minimum labour law regulations (e.g. breaks), work on Sundays and public holidays; small wage increases;
  - challenging unbalanced managerial power
- **Obstacles:**
    - anti-union management and facade partnership with ‘paper-tiger’ unions
    - high activists turnover (short-term union careers)
    - new oligarchisation (company-level leaders vs. rank-and-files)
    - self-destructive company focus – *disinterest and disregard for ‘politics’*
    - common disbelief in futility of temporary agency workers organising (cost/benefit calculations; turnover even higher...) they do not believe it is worthy to invest on TAW because they will quit the organisation soon.

## New grassroots unionism in the PL retail

- **Michał (25 years old, NSZZ 'S')**: *I started to work in a hypermarket in 2007... At the beginning I liked this work (...) I was motivated to join trade unions by deteriorating working conditions...as far as this shop is concerned. I was simply determined because meanwhile my daughter was born...Now there is the second one. So I had to take a home loan, so, as I said, wages in the hypermarket weren't too high, rather low...And we decided to do something with it. So, a lot of you people, these were mostly young people who got committed to the union, 90% of them are young (...) At the beginning we were afraid, but we managed. The union functions less than 1 year, but it dynamically grows, because we have now more than 1000 members. It's a lot but in this company is not so much because there are 12,000 employees.*
- **Iwona (34 years old, NSZZ'S', cashier)**: *I haven't worked for a long time because when I looked for work, something went always wrong. Afterwards I had a small shop with my cousin, but ... we split up. Then ... I worked in a hypermarket, but it wasn't it ((laughing)), so I changed to this hypermarket... I worked for 1,5 year in the cashiers' department and perhaps this led me to change something. Because it was terrible... People were oppressed, abused. (...) I got a phone number to the union and there was an immediate reaction... I didn't want to make revolution, it was just about to be able to work normally, to make them stop bullying people....Honestly, I would say that I associate Solidarność immediately with Wałęsa and all this stuff. Not that I have any special ideas or a phobia about it. No, I simply needed some help and I got it from them.*

# Company-level developments - GR

- Enduring traditions of militancy at serious risk
- Dramatic losses of union density
- Redundancies of union activists – Expanding hostility
- Greater precarisation and individualisation of work
- Episodes of impressive mobilization that works! – small islands in a huge ocean of deregulation

## Obstacles:

- high activists turnover (short-term union careers, redundancies)
- Competition between TUs and Social Movements(company-level leaders vs. rank-and-files)
- New legislation for decentralization of CB
- Self-destructive sometimes ideological focus – *disinterest and disregard for 'bread and butter'*
- *Sectarianism* and rigid ideological divisions
- Convergence to Polish/ CEE paradigm 10 years ago (?)



## **New grassroots unionism in the GR retail**

- **Σταύρος (31 years old, Carefour - Μαρινόπουλος):** *In my previous job the reason I was made redundant was not based on economic, but on pure political considerations. After that I felt the need to join the union because it is important. Before I was acting as Don Kichote expecting that workers can support the union even if they do not participate actively on its activities. Quite the opposite, employers need to feel the threat of strike and employee resistance round the clock.*
- **Γιάννης (24 years old, Praktiker , cashier):** *Bureaucratic unions have nothing to offer to ordinary workers. They are part of the problem and to a great extent responsible for the messy conditions prevailing at work. I do not trust big unions, they have not a clue of what we are going through every day at work.*

# Conclusions - PL

- Quite limited *direct* involvement of trade unions – even if radicalised – in the problems of precarious workers in Poland
  - Focus on hypermarkets and standard employees
  - No supra-company collective agreements;
  - Limited role of industrial actions
  - Disbelief in politics
  - Neither very militant nor radical political unions, but new trade unions starting from the basic demands (which sound radical because of anti-union context)
- Indirect involvement:
  - changing trade union image via new media campaigns (e.g. Hyper-exploitation)
  - gradual inflow of new, young activists exerting pressure on high-level union structures

# Conclusions - GR

- Quite limited *direct* involvement of radicalised trade unions in the problems of precarious workers in Greece
  - Widespread e-mobilisation and e-activism, but very few cases of industrial action and much fewer narratives of victory
  - No supra-company collective agreements; Gigantic anti-union climate of deregulation
  - Strong belief in politics protesting on the streets, but not at the workplace
- Indirect involvement:
  - Pushing big trade unions to radicalize their demands and break the traditions of partnerships with Labour party (street politics/ social media)

# Radical Unionism: A long way to go

- The meaning of radicalism is very different. The role of political ideology and left-wing political activists in the mobilisation of young precarious workers is greater in GR
- In both cases radical unionism can not be transplanted into a recipe for success (improving the labour market situation of young precarious workers).
- Widespread de-legitimization of mainstream/ pre-existing traditions and legacies of unionism due to ideology and crisis in Greece and due to strong informal personal networks of young people in Poland
- In both cases, radical unionism exerts strong pressures to the existing high-level and bureaucratic trade union structures
- The issue of space is important. Particular localities very important, political praxis formulated in specific spatialities
- Radical political unionism in GR and PL is still an isolated phenomenon, but successful, even if it has only soft outcomes linked to changing the view of unions (small victories) and not hard outcome-linked to CB agenda
- More political vision of unionism is missing in PL, but big radical political visions without bread and butter emphasis is not enough for GR (Redundancies in GR and working conditions in PL).

