

Organising workers' counter-power in Italy and Greece

Lorenzo Zamponi and Markos Vogiatzoglou

Trade unions in Southern European's austerity-ridden countries have been considerably weakened by the last six years of crisis. Labour's loss of power in countries such as Greece and Italy is significant. First of all, the tri-partite systems of collective bargaining (state, employers, unions) that characterised the 1990s and early 2000s in both countries collapsed. Neither state nor employers have shown any concrete willingness to re-establish some sort of collective bargaining mechanisms. Governments in austerity-ridden countries do not seem to need unions anymore.¹

Secondly, despite their vocal opposition, trade unions have failed to block austerity measures, as well as other detrimental changes in labour legislation. The period 2008-2014 has been characterised by limited worker mobilisation in Italy and by the failure of the numerous protests and general strikes in Greece to deliver any concrete achievements. Worse, union members express deep mistrust of their own leadership, as does the broader population.²

This bleak landscape does not give the whole picture of labour movement activity in those countries, however. In both cases, interesting labour-related projects are being developed to restore a workers' counter-power, both by unionists and social movement activists who are exploring actions outside of the traditional trade union repertoire. They draw from concepts such as 'social movement unionism',³ social

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unionism⁴ or 'radical political unionism',⁵ which will be detailed below. This article aims to contribute, through the analysis of concrete experiences, to this debate.

First, we examine efforts to organise precarious workers in professions and productive sectors that previously had weak or no union presence. Second, we investigate projects addressing changes in the physical space where production takes place and their consequences on collective organisation. Then we turn the focus to workers' mutualism (i.e. social solidarity structures ran by the workers themselves), initiatives providing access to welfare that are beyond both the market and the state. Finally, we look at projects that are posing broader questions regarding models of production and development. The article closes with some concluding questions and remarks regarding the future of trade unionism.

We argue that these experiences signal radical innovation in trade union activism. However, this innovation is not likely to spontaneously expand beyond dispersed experiments if it only involves the already politicised components of the urban youth that tend to compose social movements. It will require a massive effort by trade unions to renew their structures, discourse and practices, while labour-related social movement activists will need to contribute to organising all parts of the working population.

Organising the unorganised

In the last 20 years, the workers' movement in *Italy* has been experimenting to counter the effects of precarious work. Its most salient issue has probably been the struggle against different aspects of the labour flexibilisation process. In the context of the recent economic crisis, the idea to "organise the unorganised"⁶ has become the main goal of the Italian labour movement. The push in this direction has come mostly from social movements, building on the experiences of the early 2000s, from radical activism (in cases such as EuroMayDay, the anti-precarity campaigns organised by groups using the symbol of San Precario, the patron saint of precarious workers)⁷ as much as from the struggles that took place in specific workplaces (e.g. precarious university researchers, call-centre workers). Student mobilisations between 2008 and 2011 made precarity a prominent issue in Italy, as people became more aware of the impacts of austerity on young people, deprived of opportunities and rights.⁸

This context favoured the emergence of a broad set of initiatives. On the one hand, in workplaces where precarious workers coexist with permanent employees, some grassroots initiatives of organising workers have taken place, characterised by a horizontal and movement-oriented model. These initiatives are independent from the unions but able to establish (not without conflict) fruitful relationships with them – as has happened with the networks of precarious university researchers and the committees of precarious journalists with their respective sector unions.

On the other hand, trades not traditionally characterised by a high degree of unionisation, such as freelance work, especially in the arts, culture and communication sectors, have experimented in autonomous forms of organisation, including professional associations (ACTA for independent workers in education, information, communication and consulting, ANA for archaeologists, etc.) and movement networks (*Il Quinto Stato*, a political and cultural network of freelance workers reflecting and mobilising on their

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conditions across sectors). Furthermore, country-wide political campaigns, like “*Voglio Restare*” (“I want to stay” that sheds light on rising emigration of Italian youth looking for better job opportunities), have tried to impact public opinion, attempting to politicise the widespread worry about “youth without a future”. These initiatives have used their mobilisation potential and their growing public support as a leverage to push for radical reforms on issues such as elimination of precarious contracts, public investment in education, research and innovation, basic income, etc.

This push from below brought the demands of these precarious workers' organisations to the attention of Italian trade union confederations, in particular some components of the largest one, CGIL. In the last few years, CGIL has been experimenting in this field mainly through three kinds of initiatives:

- local struggles to organise precarious workers (e.g. *Consulta delle professioni*, “council of self-employed workers”) or to extend permanent contracts to them (e.g. public research centres)
- national political campaigns to mobilise precarious workers outside the workplace and across sectors (e.g. *Giovani non più disposti a tutto*, “Young people no longer available for anything”; *Il nostro tempo è adesso*, “Our time is now”)
- attempts at “inclusive bargaining”, trying to re-organise the traditional structure of collective agreements, in order to include precarious workers, subcontracted employees and so on in national and local agreements

The latter experiments are indeed interesting and necessary, even though they come perhaps late in the game: the credibility of trade union confederations has been heavily undermined by delays in tackling the precarity issue, as well as their timid opposition to austerity policies. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that even the most advanced experiments conducted at the grassroots level by movement actors will be able to go beyond their limited size and relevance without the critical mass and the social rootedness of trade union confederations.

A parallel development in terms of organisation of precarious workers' has taken place in Greece. It is important to note a major difference, however: while Italian activists operated mostly outside the traditional workplace, as noted above, the Greek initiatives emerged mostly from inside the workplace and the organisational format chosen by the activists was that of grassroots union entities (company-level or productive sector-level unions). The first attempts were launched during the mid-1990s in the food and catering services, as well as postal services.⁹ Soon after these precarious workers' unions expanded to include other sectors and professions that were non-unionised or had weak union presence, such as cleaning services, telecommunications, technicians and engineers working under an ‘associate’ status.

These grassroots unions were founded and initially led by politicised leftist and anarchist activists as bottom-up initiatives in which union elites were not involved, although the precarious workers' unions do belong to the ranks of the Greek Trade Union Confederation (GSEE) with a few small exceptions. Due to its particular status by Southern European standards (GSEE is the only confederation of private sector workers and is pluralist in political terms), primary unions enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy, with regards to their political line and strategy. Unionised precarious workers characterise their relation with the confederation as “bad”,¹⁰ because instances of open conflict with or indifference from the central trade union system have been more frequent than collaborative experiences.

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While the precarious workers' unions of Greece constitute a most interesting experiment, due to their firm rooting in the workplace and the high popularity they enjoy both among labour and the broader social movements, they have faced serious difficulties in expanding their activity and scope since the crisis. The reason is that high unemployment – and the consequent fear within the labour force – renders mobilising (and producing victories or concrete achievements) for mid- and small-scale labour struggles extremely difficult. On the other hand, in the Italian context, the high level of fragmentation of the initiatives by precarious workers, both inside and outside the unions, is limiting their capacity to gain more social relevance.

The new workspace

Changes in the geographical organisation of labour in the last three decades, in particular the way the workforce has been physically dispersed across multiple locations, are one of the key causes of the disarticulation of the working class.

How is it possible to create the conditions for workers' organisation and collective action without sharing a common physical space? It is telling that the main protagonists of the Italian anti-austerity mobilisations of 2010 and 2011 have been students and steelworkers: schools, universities and what is left of the once massive Italian metal industry are probably some of the last remaining collective spaces, in which aggregation, socialisation, politicisation, unionisation and mobilisation are still possible.

Different experiments have been proposed in *Italy*, in an effort to construct something similar to the traditional labour centres (*camere del lavoro* in Italy, *bourses du travail* in France, *labour councils* in the UK), which provide a physical space and the chance to nurture a collective identity for workers' organisations based in the same region yet belonging to different industries. They also encourage politicisation and the possibility to organise territorial struggles beyond the workplace, on issues such as housing, welfare and civil rights. The most recent examples include: co-working spaces self-managed by freelance workers; movement-based *camere del lavoro* addressing precarious work in urban areas, in cooperation with grassroots unions; specific spaces inside trade union confederations' own traditional seats (*camere del lavoro*) set up to address job precarity for young people.

The so-called social strike of 14 November 2014 in Italy was another particularly noteworthy initiative that sought to overcome traditional barriers to workers' mobilisation. Organised by an ad hoc coalition of autonomous social centres, grassroots unions, student organisations and movement groups (housing occupations, feminist collectives, etc.), the social strike aimed to redefine the idea of the strike, by extending it to a wider set of struggles.¹¹ It is still too soon to evaluate the longer term outcomes of this initiative but what is clear is that the social strike proved an efficient tool to build a movement coalition in opposition to neoliberal policies and to bring back traditional concepts of trade union activity into the vocabulary used by the most politicised segments of the population – even if it had a limited impact on Italian society at large, due to the size of the unions that participated in the initiative.

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Connected with the re-appropriation of spaces in labour-related struggles, there has also been a growing practice of occupation, significantly used by workers in the cultural and artistic sector who, between 2008 and 2012, occupied and self-managed dozens of cinemas, theatres and other abandoned spaces claiming them as “commons”, that is universally accessible and free both from state and private property control.¹² Other forms of occupation and “permanent presence” have been central in protests against the closing of productive facilities linked to the post-2008 recession. That year, steelworkers occupied the INNSE factory in Milan to stop the owners closing the factory and taking away the machines; a delegation of five workers climbed up a crane and said they would stay there until a solution was found (another company later bought the plant and restarted production).

Following this model, workers of many factories at risk of closure decided to climb on the roof of their factories, or on important monuments in their cities.¹³ The most famous case is probably the one of *L'isola dei Cassintregрати* (literally “The island of workers on redundancy payment”, imitating a famous reality TV show portraying the daily life of celebrities on an exotic island), which in 2010 and 2011 featured a group of chemical workers who occupied for more than 15 months the abandoned prison of Asinara island, north of Sardinia, in a media experiment they called “the only real reality show”; they started a blog in which they told their individual and collective stories, attracting the attention of national and international media.¹⁴

Most of these experiences of occupations have been conducted by workers with the discreet support of trade unions. However, there are notable exceptions where trade unions have played a more direct role. It was an initiative of the agricultural workers federation FLAI-CGIL¹⁵ that launched the *sindacato di strada* (“street union”), a project that brought union organisers to travel to the fields of Southern Italy in a camping van in an attempt to break the forced isolation of exploited migrant workers.

Spatial workforce reconfigurations were much less of a focus in terms of theoretical debate and practical innovation in Greece. The most interesting experiment is the so-called Workers' Clubs that have sprung up lately, initially in neighbourhoods of Athens and then in various cities across the country. Operating in a similar manner as the mid-1990s US-based Workers Centers, the Workers' Clubs in Greece aim to extend the labour struggle beyond the limits of what is commonly conceived as the workplace. They are not formally affiliated with the trade union system, although their employed members are usually involved in their respective unions too. The flexible structure and local focus allows these clubs to engage two groups of people that remain disconnected from traditional trade unions: workers from very small companies and the unemployed. As a member of the Nea Smyrni Workers' Club (WCNS) stated:

“The Workers' Club wants to become a ‘city union’, which will complement, not substitute, the working class unionism inside the labour space. At the same time, it shall unite in struggle the workers and the unemployed across the city.”¹⁶

This comment brings forward one of the main structural difficulties Workers' Clubs face in Greece (similar to the majority of Italian experiments): Despite their innovative logic and advanced understanding of the spatial reconfigurations of labour, their self-depiction as initiatives “complementary” to the formal trade union system, increases their probability of remaining at the margins of a structurally unchanged trade union scene.

Welfare from below

Austerity in the sense of retrenchment on hard-won welfare has been a reality both in Greece and Italy since the early 1990s: national funding for education, health care and social security has decreased systematically, and at an accelerating rate particularly after the 2008 economic crisis.

In response, in *Italy* workers are increasingly embracing the mutualistic tradition that characterised the labour movement's origins in the Nineteenth century, particularly precarious workers such as freelance workers.¹⁷ Co-working spaces in which freelance workers not only share a workstation, but also establish relationships and get access to common services, are increasingly popular in Italy, even if their level of politicisation (or commercialisation) varies considerably, ranging from occupied social centres to more business-type rented spaces.

In this context, there is an ongoing debate on the potential of 'welfare from below' to provide, through freely established relationships of cooperation and solidarity, the level of assistance and social security that state-run welfare programmes do not offer anymore. The experiences are still too limited in size and duration to be evaluated properly, but early results appear mixed. On the upside, they provide a useful link between the labour and the commons movements, and the possibility to experiment with new democratic and solidarity-based practices, as an alternative to neoliberalism. On the downside, we cannot overlook the risk that these new actors can behave like private ones, substituting for the role of the public sector, justifying welfare retrenchment *ex post*, and continuing the same exploitative capitalist practices, but this time with the label of a "sharing economy".¹⁸

In *Greece*, where the (already weak) welfare state model has been totally dismantled after sweeping austerity measures and reforms,¹⁹ the ensuing socio-economic and humanitarian crisis²⁰ has led to the bottom-up emergence of significant social solidarity structures: for example, social hospitals, pharmacies and grocery stores, soup kitchens and even electricians' crews (which "illegally" reconnect the electricity of the poor cut-off for non-payment of their bills). All operate on a volunteer basis and provide their services and goods for free. The formal trade union system is almost completely absent from this process, with the exception of the Electricity Company Union (GENOP-DEH); professional organisations such as the Pharmacists' Association that consists of self-employed shop-owners have also taken part. The core of activists undertaking the voluntary work are politicised specialists in their field (doctors, medical personnel, electricians, pharmacists, and so on), either unemployed or offering their services after work. It is noteworthy that, contrary to the Italian case, Greece had never experienced a "mutualist period" in the labour movement and as such these experiments constitute a true innovation in the country.

These social solidarity structures have a flexible organisational format that privileges direct democracy and assemblies. This contrasts starkly with the bureaucratic, corrupt and weak Greek welfare state of the past. However, such initiatives remain limited and temporary as their volunteers generally do not wish to extend their activities beyond the absolutely necessary (with the exception of a small radical minority); they perceive their actions as an emergency response to an extraordinary situation. The political project on which there is broad consensus is the re-establishment of some sort of safety net for the disadvantaged, so it is no longer dependent on a volunteer, charity basis.

Productive model

The labour movement has challenged, in various periods of its historical development, not only the modes of organisation of work, but also property, as well as the general configurations of production. The aforementioned occupied and recuperated companies in Italy are part of this process. And similar experiments can be seen in Greece. Through their alternative *modus operandi*, they question in a most direct way the principles of capitalist production.

The most prominent projects in Greece are the former construction material factory VIOME (Thessaloniki) as well as the Public Television and Radio (ERT). Both companies were shut down by their owners (in the case of ERT, the employer was the Greek state), but later re-launched their activities in occupied premises under worker control. VIOME recently founded a cooperative in order to legally distribute their products, while ERT employees continue to broadcast their programming from studios around Greece, despite the eviction of their headquarters in Athens in 2013. Makis Anagnostou, a VIOME worker, describes how their self-managed factory is organised:

“We took a decision of full equality among workers, equal wages for all, regardless of the type of work one is doing. What we said is: one factory stock per worker, one vote per worker (...) Finally, we decided that the factory management may be recalled at any time. The same goes for the trade union’s board. This is what we call a cooperative enterprise under workers’ control.”²¹

There has also been a major expansion of cooperatives in Greece that provide a wide range of products and services, from agricultural products to computer repairs and from courier services to bars and restaurants. There is, however, a lack of significant experience with cooperatives in the country, which also explains the lack of awareness on the risks of cooperatives’ replicating mechanisms of labour exploitation and tax evasion.

While social movements have provided ample support to these new cooperatives and worker-controlled enterprises, union elites remain largely indifferent. Even the ERT workers, who received initial support from the Journalists’ Union, frequently denounce GSEE for their complacency and lack of support. Unionists associated with the Communist Party of Greece actually oppose the occupied factories and cooperatives, on political grounds, accusing their leaders of wanting to become “small bosses”. The lack of support suggests, therefore, that many of these initiatives may either die away under the pressure of for-profit competitors or subsist largely unnoticed at the margins of an unchanged capitalist economy.

Nonetheless, and turning the focus back to Italy, the political and symbolic potential of recuperation should not be underestimated: the transfer of installations confiscated from organised crime by the Italian state to workers’ cooperatives has bolstered the idea of worker control as well as provided jobs and opportunities for economic development.

However, neither worker-controlled nor capitalist enterprises can escape the contradictions that emerge when industrial development threatens environmental sustainability. For example, the Italian factory ILVA in Taranto – one of the largest metal factories in Europe with 12,000 employees –, once owned by the

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Italian state and privatised in the 1990s, was almost shutdown in 2012 following a judicial investigation into the pollution created by the factory. This created a conflict between people's dual interests as workers and as residents of the same area, between their job and their health. Maintaining an equilibrium between the demand for full employment and awareness of the damages of industrial growth is a hard one to strike for the labour movement, and the Italian steelworkers' union FIOM found itself in a difficult position on the ILVA issue, trying to advance a complex and courageous proposal aiming to defend both the jobs of the workers and environmental safety. The issue is still far from closed, and the contradiction between work and environmental risks could create a cleavage between trade unions and social movements. The idea that trade unions should discuss not only the organisation of production, but also what is produced at what social and environmental cost, is gaining grounds in the most enlightened components of the Italian trade union system, but the road to concrete and effective proposals is still long.

In northern *Greece*, a proposal to construct new gold mines in Chalkidiki led some of the area's residents to strongly support the mines' construction because of the promise of jobs, while many others rejected the project on ecological and developmental grounds. A series of violent clashes between the police and the residents, the massive indiscriminate arrests of locals and the persistent doubts about the legality and environmental sustainability of the project, all helped to create a nation-wide movement against the gold mines. During this conflict, the mining company's workers' union strongly supported the construction project, sparking outrage among movement activists. However the union movement is itself divided with high-ranking officials of the trade union system carefully distancing themselves from the conflict, while the precarious workers' grassroots unions are generally supporting the anti-mine mobilisations.

A positive example, both in Italy and in Greece, of trade unionists addressing social and environmental issues, is the committed participation of union members and officials in campaigns against water privatisation. The Thessaloniki Water Company Workers' Union has been leading the struggle against the company's privatisation since 2010. It has received ample support in its efforts both by activists and many other unions not necessarily associated with the water sector. In Italy, the CGIL and many grassroots unions actively supported the campaign that led to the victorious referendum in June 2011 calling for the return to public management of water. Once again, the fruitful debate between the labour and the commons movement provides very interesting perspectives for the development of forward-looking social activism.

Moving forward

The new developments presented in this paper raise some important questions, yet neither institutional trade unions nor informal workers' collectives are fully addressing them. Formal trade unions will require significant structural change – not simply a different leadership or political strategy – if they are to include the masses of precarious workers in their ranks, and if they are to start to restore workers' counter-power in the grim post-crisis setting of Southern Europe. How can such structural changes be ignited and which directions should they take?

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The small, experimental projects taking place on the margins of the official trade union system are important, but for the moment lack the necessary influence and critical mass required in order to have a broader societal impact. How will activists manage to expand their scope and activity in order to concretely contribute to workers' counter-power in the austerity era?

Across Europe, workers and social movements are clearly demonstrating that they both understand the challenges facing the labour movement and have the practical innovative, committed ideas and proposals to reverse the situation. What is missing is a practical debate on how to move forward, commencing from these already existing experiences. The cases we have briefly summarised point towards the reconstruction of the labour movement based on radical innovations in trade union action. Southern Europe, in the midst of an economic crisis and austerity policies, is becoming a laboratory of social and political change.

To expand beyond the laboratory will first require greater coordination and cooperation between trade unions and social movements. Trade union confederations need to recognise their failure to stop the implementation of austerity policies and their inexcusable delay in tackling issues such as labour precarity, workplace reconfigurations and the potential for a transition to a new productive model, which has undermined their credibility among the most politicised sectors of the social movement landscape. Social movement actors will need to let go of their faith in the idea that a new society will spontaneously arise from the dissemination of interesting, innovative, yet limited and isolated experiments and come to terms with the complex realities of the post-Fordist workplace.

A radical reform, in terms of structure, content and practices of trade unions is needed. The examples presented here, emerging from trade unions and social movements alike, may provide useful indications for the potential direction of such a reform. It is important to clarify that what we propose is not a fusion of social movement organisations with trade unions. Given the ideological differences between the various political sectors, as well as the need for plurality in the roles that social actors undertake in contemporary society, such a project would be inexcusably naïve. Nevertheless, there was a time in which different ideological options coexisted in the context of a labour movement able to play a significant role in society. Any actor interested in contributing to workers' counter-power in the face of neoliberal hegemony should take seriously the need to reconstruct the labour movement and to radically reform trade unionism, starting from the most innovative experiences taking place today. What we now consider "new unionism", "movement unionism" or "social unionism" might simply become tomorrow's *unionism*.

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