

Fighting Austerity: Rebuilding Unions from Below



Programme

ATHENS 18-19 JUNE 2013

In the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 new forms of capital accumulation have produced a new 'cycle of contention' in (global) labour relations across Europe and beyond. Tough austerity programs and neoliberal restructuring exercises that aim to deal with capitalism instability have left in their wakes a litany of woes among ordinary workers and their families: high unemployment rates, dramatic expansion of precarious jobs, welfare state retrenchment to unprecedented levels, numerous homicides related to debt problems, enormous and growing inequalities in wealth and income, shanty towns and collapsed communities. The wave of general strikes that have swept across Europe since 2009 has not managed to protect workers from contemporary configurations of social risk and various economic stressors.

Nevertheless, the promotion of marketisation, privatisation and labour market deregulation policies have their own limits, as notable uprisings by frustrated populations have become endemic since 2010 especially in countries most acutely affected by government austerity programmes. Further, the tough situation of more and more ordinary workers, households and communities has affected in turn trade union and social movement strategies. Numerous mobilization stories from Wisconsin to London and Athens indicate that community organizing, working with local assemblies and coalition building strategies with broader social groups, networks of activists and the media have stopped being the abandoned children of union organization. Nevertheless, the resistance to ongoing neoliberal social engineering is half-finished, unpredictable and diffuse. For this reason, the future of the organized labour seems to be at a crossroads, with its future direction vacillating between a potential for either boom or dust.

There are common traits, but national paths to this development. For example, the upturn in union activity has been accompanied on certain cases by an increase in union membership in US and Britain, while in Southern Europe and the Balkans (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia) a growing number of radical unions, along with the movement of Indignados and massive protests against austerity provided new tactics and mobilising strategies that have been for a long time neglected by the mainstream unions. Today, even if austerity policies are still winning and governments and Troika handmaidens continue to tight the screws we can never tell which spark will start a fire. It seems that something is in the air, especially in the suffered by austerity countries of Southern Europe and especially Greece.

The question this conference asks is whether radicalized unionism, political action and grassroots activism present opportunities for union renewal and collective interest representation in the current changing economic context. This question will be examined across different national contexts in Europe with diverse industrial

Programme

ATHENS 18-19 JUNE 2013

relations frameworks, as well as trade union structures and narratives of resistance to neoliberalism and marketization. The conference builds on the analysis of radical union strategies and identities, which tend to be overlooked or side-lined in analyses of union renewal. Relevant questions and issues of high importance for the agenda of the conference include the following:

- Are the prospects for union renewal bleak, with apparently insurmountable challenges providing little hope to imagine there will be any revival of fortunes?
- Is the unfavourable context confronting unions, an important part of the problem or has also been the limitations of their own strategic leadership approach towards union organising, as well as their enfeebled industrial and political response towards neoliberal globalisation?
- What role rank-and-file union members and radical left-wing forces can play in revitalising labour movement and re-imagining of worker representation?
- Are there 'hidden exchanges' of tools and ideas between radical and mainstream unions or are they separate worlds that collide with each other?

The conference will take place in the cultural centre of Saroniko's Municipality Cultural Centre in Kalyvia (about 15 minutes by taxi from Athens Airport). There are no registration fees. For more details about the conference emails sinedrio@thepressproject.gr and L.Kretsos@gre.ac.uk

Tuesday June 18

11:00 – 12.00

Registration on Door, Tea & Coffee

12:00 – 12:30
WELCOME

Lefteris Kretsos, (GLI Athens / Greenwich)
Alexis Tsipras, (Syriza-USF)
Petros Filippou, (Municipality of Saronikos)

12:30 – 14:00
**The Politics of
International Austerity**

Chair: **Savas Robolis**, (Panteion University of Athens)
Ian Greer, Work and Employment Research Unit (WERU / Greenwich), 'The challenge of resisting austerity: welfare politics in Germany and the UK'
David Hall, Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU / Greenwich), 'Privatizations in the era of Austerity'
Jane Lethbridge, Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU / Greenwich), 'Public sector union responses to austerity cuts in Europe'

14:00 – 14.30

Coffee Break + finger food

14:30 – 16:30
**Organising Precarious
and Informal Workers**

Chair: **Apostolos Dedoussopoulos**, (Panteion University of Athens)
Dave Spooner, (GLI UK), 'Precarious and Informal Work - The Challenge for Trade Union Organisation'
Violeta Zlateva, (Bulgarian Homeworkers' Association), 'The organization and unionisation of informal workers in Bulgaria'
Miguel Martinez Lucio, (Manchester), 'Are unions up to the job of representation today?'
Ron Oswald, International Union of Foodworkers (IUF), 'IUF organizing strategies on MNCs from below, inside and above'

Wednesday June 19

9:30 – 10.00

Coffee / tea available

10:00 – 12:00
**Organising From Below in
Southern Europe – fighting
back through trade union
renewal**

Chair: **Costas Dimoulas**, (Panteion University of Athens)
Dalilah Reuben-Shemia, (Industrial Workers of the World IWW), 'Solidarity Unionism: From organizing supply chains to industrial democracy'
VIOME Representative, 'The experiment of self-organizing in Viome Factory'
Yiota Lazaropoulou, (Temporary Agency Workers of National Bank of Greece / Ethnodata Workers Union), 'Organizing Temporary Agency Workers in Banking'
Antonis Stamatopoulos, Athens Underground Workers Union, 'The ongoing struggle of Athens Metro Workers'
Maria Mantynen, (Greenwich), 'Reimagining Work and Life in an Argentinian Cooperative'

Programme

ATHENS 18-19 JUNE 2013

12:00 – 12:30	Coffee / tea available
12:30 – 14:30 The Politics of Trade Unionism: Unions, Political Parties and Democratic Socialism	Chair: Yiannis Kouzis , (Panteion University of Athens) Dan Gallin , Global Labour Institute, Geneva, 'The Crisis of the Labour Movement' George Gavrilis , (Syriza), 'The dual crisis of trade unionism and socialism' Christoforos Vernardakis , (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki), 'Trade Unions or Trade Union Cartels? The experience of Greek Trade Union Organisations since 1996 – 2013' Paolo Borioli , (Rome La Sapienza and KUA Copenhagen University), 'Working class, worker's movement and left wing parties in Italy' Krastyo Petkov and Atanas Vladikov , (University of Plovdiv) 'Failure of the Austerity Policies and Dismantlement of the Social Dialogue in Bulgaria'
12:00 – 12:30	Coffee / tea available
15:00 – 16:00 Coalition Building Strategies: Working with the Media and Community	Chair: Lefteris Kretsos , (GLI Athens/ Greenwich) Costas Efimeros , (ThePressproject.gr), 'Unions and Media' Dimitris Iatrou (ex-mayor Keratea)

For more details about the conference emails

sinedrio@thepressproject.gr

and L.Kretsos@gre.ac.uk