

# TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

## Country Study Greece

**Giorgos Bithymitris and Argyris Biskinis**  
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This study is part of an EU-wide cross-country research endeavour examining trade union options in dealing with right-wing populist forces. The focus here is on the political processes and trade union experiences in Greece, with special emphasis on the practices of the extreme-right party “Golden Dawn” and the responses of the Greek trade unions in the so-called crisis decade (2009–2019).

### HISTORICAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

#### HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM IN GREECE

The official history of trade unionism in Greece dates back to the early 20th century. The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE; *Genikí Synomospondía Ergatón Elládos*), which is the only official confederation of unions in the private sector today, was established in 1918, just few days before the founding of the Socialist Labour Party of Greece (originally named SEKE, it became the KKE in 1924; *Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas*). The weak institutional basis of the Greek polity is reflected inter alia on the evolution of the state-labour relations, which for the most part of the 20th century followed a highly distinct pattern in comparison with the west-European liberal democracies. Coercive state-led practices on the one hand (i. e., persecution of left-wing trade unionists, shut-down of militant unions), and extensive state interference in the internal union affairs on the other, resulted in a scheme that has reasonably been described as Sisyphean: Whereas in the West the dominant pattern was “prohibition → toler-

ance → recognition,” in Greece, the industrial relations path was rather “prohibition → tolerance → prohibition” (Liakos 1993). It was the restoration of democracy in 1974 and particularly the rise to power of the Socialist Party (PASOK; *Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima*) that laid the ground for the democratisation of the Greek trade unions and the integration of the hitherto oppressed progressive currents.

The 60-year-long right-wing hegemony within the Greek trade union movement was built on anti-communism and nationalism. These two core ideological elements were articulated through the “official” ideology of *ethnikofrosini* (national-mindedness), which designated both the internal and external threats, and the alleged continuity of the “Hellenic-Christian civilization” (Papadimitriou 2006). The combination of coercion, and clientelism (mostly directed from the political elite, but also from the big employers in industry) further consolidated the right-wing hegemony, which was highly consequential for the mobilisation of trade union resources, as far as it tolerated (if not provoked) the exclusion of working-class communities, militant activists, progressive political organisations, undermining the labour movement unity and solidarity (Koukoules 1994; Kouzis 2007). The era of the military junta (1967–1974) was arguably the heyday of the ideological union of nationalism and anti-communism

within the official union movement. This later began to recede as democratisation progressed. In the new era of cultural transformation, far-reaching shifts of the electorate towards the left and centre-left at various levels of governance and heightened social expectations for more egalitarian standards of living, the available room for nationalism and authoritarian politics was fundamentally reduced. When it comes to union politics, the prevalence of the centre-left has never seriously been challenged either from the conservatives, the radical left, or the communists. GSEE has been led by members of PASOK – Movement for Change (PASOK-KINAL; PASOK – Kínima Allagís, henceforth PASOK) since 1983 (Bithymitris /Kotsonopoulos 2017; Bithymitris 2021a).

It was only during the decade of the Greek crisis that the nationalist ideology started once again casting its threatening shadow on organised labour. Before delving into details on the failed neo-fascist attempt to encroach on the labour movement, it is necessary to first introduce and describe the union structure and political representation in Greece.

## LANDSCAPE OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN PRE-CRISIS GREECE

The industrial relations system in Greece assumed its current form only after the collapse of the dictatorship and the establishment of the Third Republic in 1974. Even after the restoration of democracy, union activities continued to be subject to stringent controls by the state. The 1982 updated law on trade unions, among other things, paved the way for proportional representation and the inclusion of radical unionism. In the wake of European integration, legal initiatives (free collective bargaining, social dialogue, and the participation of union representatives in governmental bodies of social policy and economy), along with a shift from adversarial industrial relations to moderate union politics, started shaping a new institutional context which remained intact until the so-called Greek crisis.

The institutional arrangements of this period were sustained by a largely unitary union model, though bifurcated along the private-public division (Katsaroumbas /Koukiadaki 2019: 267). The two official trade union confederations are GSEE and the Civil Servants' Confederation (ADEDY; *Anótati Dioíkisi Dimosíon Ypallílon*).<sup>1</sup> GSEE primarily represents workers

in the private sector, but also public sector workers on temporary contracts (such as employees of public companies), as well as workers in public companies under private law. ADEDY is the confederation for workers in the public sector, workers employed by legal entities under public law, and local government workers. In terms of the structure of trade unions, the Greek law makes provision for three different levels:

- a) **First-level** trade unions: These trade unions are legally autonomous. Their activities are mostly limited either to a particular region or business. They may be part of a national sectoral trade union or a regional trade union federation (second level).
- b) **Second-level** trade unions: These trade unions are either national, industrial, or occupational federations (sectoral trade unions) or regional organisations (Labour Centres).
- c) **Third-level** trade unions: These are national trade union confederations, such as GSEE and ADEDY, which are comprised of second-level trade unions.

The links between trade unions and political parties have traditionally been very strong in Greece. The parties have direct representation in the unions, namely in the form of political factions standing for election under a different name. The faction with the most seats or a coalition made up of several factions subsequently appoints the president of the trade union confederation. The socialist faction leads the GSEE (38.6 per cent of the vote in the 2020 elections for the union board), with the conservative and the communist faction following (23.1 per cent and 19.6 per cent, respectively). The conservative faction leads ADEDY (25.3 per cent in the 2019 elections), with the socialists (PASOK), the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), and the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA; *Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras*) following (19.1 per cent, 18.6 per cent, and 14.2 per cent, respectively).

The power configuration within the Greek trade unions does not correspond to the dynamics of the political system in Greece. This is not the right place to provide an overarching analysis of the Greek political landscape of the last fifty years, nevertheless, some major aspects should be stressed. The function of democracy in terms of procedure, results, and content, has conventionally been associated with the stable alternation in power between the socialists (PASOK) and the conservative New Democracy party (ND; *Néa Dimokratía*) for almost four decades (1974–2012), which

<sup>1</sup> There are also some small unions in the private sector that keep their distances from the official trade union structure (GSEE) and could fall into the category of social movement unionism, but their broader influence remains marginal.

is also considered the heyday of Greek bipartisanship (scoring well above 70 per cent). In this period, the parliamentary left is represented primarily by the (KKE; *Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas*), a Marxist-Leninist party with strong anti-capitalist discourse (approximately 5–8 per cent of the vote), and, to a lesser extent, the Eurocommunist Left, which in 2004 took the form of a coalition of left-wing parties (approximately 3–5 per cent of the vote), until its transformation into a unified political party in 2012 (SYRIZA). Interestingly, while both the party system and the trade union organisations were shaken by the debt crisis of 2009 and the subsequent austerity measures, significant changes took place within the party system only. Some of the tectonic changes include the spectacular rise of the radical left led SYRIZA to power in 2015 (in collaboration with a small right-wing party, a by-product of the crisis itself), the disintegration of the PASOK party, who lost almost a 75 per cent of their electoral power within 3 years, and the electoral success of the neo-Nazi party “Golden Dawn” (GD; *Laiós Síndesmos – Chrysí Avgí*), whose vote share increased by 6.97 per cent from about 20,000 in 2009 to 440,000 in 2012.

## EFFECTS OF THE RECENT ECONOMIC CRISIS ON ORGANISED LABOUR

Arguably, the economic crisis, the austerity politics, and the social unrest from 2009–2015 left their marks on organised labour; however, these factors’ impact did not include an internal re-configuration of power. The loss of unions’ institutional centrality in 2010–2011 was painful: With the onset of Greece’s bailout plans and implementation of austerity measures, unions found themselves confronting four major threats: (a) The deregulation of the labour market, and an unprecedented erosion of collective bargaining (see Table 1; see also

Katsaroumbas / Koukiadaki 2019: 268); (b) skyrocketing unemployment rates, coupled with a precarisation of labour<sup>2</sup>; (c) the decline of union membership (Bithymitris / Kotsionopoulos, 2017; see also Table 1); and (d) the extreme-right assault against unionism.

The resilience of the socialist faction vis-à-vis the impotence of the radical left to translate its impressive electoral performance into a hegemonic positioning within trade unions have already been commented on elsewhere (Bithymitris 2018). What is more interesting for the present study is a question that has remained ill-attended within the scholarship of the extreme right in Greece: Why has the neo-fascist tide, which proved particularly appealing for a large segment of the popular classes (arguably the most disenfranchised and dispossessed), failed to penetrate organised labour? Why have the GD’s assaults, both physical and ideological, against unionists warranted the failure of this party to capitalise on its growing political influence through a creation of a strong far-right faction in GSEE and ADEDY, or through the foundation of new nationalist unions? To make better sense of such inquiries, some more context is needed.

## THE EXTREME RIGHT AND THE WORKING CLASS IN CRISIS-RIDDEN GREECE

Today, the association of the rise of the radical right parties (RRPs) in Europe and elsewhere with the social implications of the Great Recession (2008) is rath-

<sup>2</sup> The total unemployment rate between 2008 and 2016 tripled from 7.8 per cent to 23.6 per cent. Statistics available here: <https://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SJO03/->. In the same period, job insecurity and involuntary part-time work increased significantly (Broughton et al. 2016).

Table 1  
Principal characteristics of collective bargaining in Greece

	2010 (per cent)	2020 (per cent)
Collective bargaining coverage rate*	100.0	14.3 (2017)
Trade union density**	25.5	15.3

Sources: \* <https://www.oecd.org/employment/ictwss-database.htm>, \*\* Own calculations based on official figures provided by GSEE and the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT).

er common place in political science, though cultural explanations are also invoked to supplement the examination of such a worrying development. Changes in both political demand (how the popular classes vote), and supply (the proletarianisation of the far right) sustained arguments in different settings, starting with the election of Donald Trump in the US in 2016, Brexit, Le Pen's more recent near path to victory in France's presidential elections, the Italian far-right's win in October 2022, the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats party, and so on. These are just some of the most striking cases of a structural political shift whose manifestation became apparent in the wake of the global crisis of 2008.

To put it in a nutshell, the mushrooming success stories of nationalists practically everywhere in the Global North can hardly be understood without recourse to two major and interrelated factors: (a) The post-2008 exacerbation of an already existing trend of material and symbolic devaluation of the post-industrial popular classes (Reckwitz 2020), and (b) the transformation of the RRP's from culturally authoritarian but economically liberal parties (the radical right's winning pre-crisis formula as described by Kitschelt and McGann in 1995) to culturally authoritarian and economically centrist or even economically leftist. Notwithstanding the cross-country variation and the inherent blurriness of the far right regarding its "real intentions" in economics, out of all of the major families of political parties, the radical right most clearly prioritises consumptive social policies (Enggist / Pingerra 2022) and social protectionism in general.

Though some commonalities between this discussion and the interpretation of the radical right upsurge in crisis-ridden Greece cannot be missed, it should be noted that parties with explicit fascist ideology, openly racist and anti-communist discourse, and para-military organisational characteristics have remained marginal in post-crisis Europe. GD occupies a distinct ideological area in the European family of far-right political parties for three main reasons. First, it is a neo-Nazi party with a racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-communist ideological profile, and whose built-in violent activism (Georgiadou 2013; Georgiadou / Kafe 2019) led to escalated criminal activity, and finally to prison (for a historical overview of the Greek extreme right see also Georgiadou 2019). Second, and less idiosyncratic, GD adopted anti-plutocratic rhetoric, opposing the neoliberal doctrines mostly assigned to the international financial capital (Bithymitris / Spyridakis 2020; Bithymitris / Koustenis 2022). Third, although the radical right's polemic against trade unionism does not normally take on the form of physical attacks, this is not the case for GD. The mur-

derous and violent actions against immigrants and political opponents have fortified the party's identification with a specific sub-group of right-wing extremism that springs directly from the fascist currents of interwar Europe.

In congruence with the proletarianisation argument, recent research on the social composition of the Greek parliamentary elites (Bithymitris, forthcoming) has shown that GD's parliamentary group has a strong working-class segment that differentiates it both from previous radical right party elites, and from the one currently representing the far right in the parliament, Greek Solution (EL; *Ellinikí Lýsi*). Setting aside the party's identity, the proletarianisation of the radical right in Greece is also corroborated at the level of electoral analysis. In the aftermath of the elections of 2012, electoral analyses foregrounded GD's capacity to draw over-proportionate support from the unemployed, voters who experience precarious employment situations while being exposed to market conditions, such as the self-employed (Georgiadou 2013; Ellinas 2015; Ellinas 2013) and those who have witnessed a degradation of class status (Ellinas 2015). In support of these studies, we also offer evidence drawing from two different datasets, one national and one local. The former is drawn from the national survey conducted in 2017 in the framework of the World Values Survey – 7<sup>th</sup> Round.<sup>3</sup> The second dataset is drawn from a recent survey conducted in Piraeus and West Attica (Christodoulou et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup>

The evidence from these two surveys (Table 2) point to an appeal of the extreme right for people who identify themselves with popular classes (working class and lower class). It should be noted that in comparison with other criteria of class belonging (i. e., income), class self-placement has stronger (and negative) effects on complex affective experiences. For instance, research in contemporary Greece has shown that the probability of feeling *ressentiment*, the emotional response to an individual's inability to acquire an object that is desired but unattainable or denied, is raised among those who identify themselves with the working class (Capelos / Demertzis 2022). This is highly consequential from a value-formation perspective, inasmuch as *ressentiment* is a significant affective driver of far-right politics.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek section of the World Values Survey was conducted from September to October 2017. The total sample consisted of 1,200 respondents, and the interviews were conducted via telephone.

<sup>4</sup> The survey was carried out in November 2020 in two regional units of Attica: Piraeus and West Attica. The total sample consisted of 554 respondents, and the interviews were conducted via telephone.

The fact that GD draws overproportionate support from the popular classes should not be seen deterministically. Though a more detailed analysis on the conditions under which working classes vote for the radical right lies beyond the scope of this research, there are indications that this type of voting behaviour is not homogenous. Table 3 shows that union members are less likely to vote for GD than non-members.

Ethnographic research has foregrounded how GD has systematically attempted to gain traction among the most insecure, and dispossessed segments of the popular classes. For instance, Koronaiou and Sakelariou (2013) describe nationalist community organising methods in two cases: (a) The case of the “Group for the Unemployed Hard-Hit Greeks”, whose goal was to supply cheap labour through a nationalist job-finding network, and (b) the case of the free dis-

Table 2  
Social Class (subjective)

<i>People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper or lower class. Would you describe yourself as belonging to the...</i>	WVS – Greece (2017)		Piraeus – West Attica (2020)	
	<i>Which party would you vote for if there were a national election tomorrow</i>		<i>Which party did you vote for in national elections (July 2019)</i>	
	Golden Dawn N = 35	Total N = 781	Golden Dawn N = 10	Total N = 554
<b>Upper Class</b>	–	0.3 %	–	–
<b>Upper Middle Class</b>	5.7 %	9.9 %	–	24.9 %
<b>Lower Middle Class</b>	14.3 %	34.8 %	20.0 %	42.8 %
<b>Working Class</b>	51.4 %	42.1 %	60.0 %	27.3 %
<b>Lower Class</b>	28.6 %	12.9 %	10.0 %	2.9 %
<b>DK / DA</b>	–	–	10.0 %	2.2 %
<b>Total</b>	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

WVS: p-value= 0,000; Piraeus-West Attica: p-value= 0,049

Table 3  
Vote and union participation

<i>Labour Unions – could you tell me whether you are a member of that type of organisation?</i>	WVS – Greece (2017)		Piraeus – West Attica (2020)	
	<i>Which party would you vote for if there were a national election tomorrow</i>		<i>Which party did you vote for in national elections (July 2019)</i>	
	Golden Dawn N = 34	Total N = 803	Golden Dawn N = 10	Total N = 554
<b>No</b>	97.1 %	94.6 %	100.0 %	85.7 %
<b>Yes (Active/Inactive)</b>	2.9 %	5.4 %	–	13.0 %
<b>DK / DA</b>	–	–	–	1.3 %
<b>Total</b>	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

WVS: p-value= 0,000; Piraeus-West Attica: p-value= 0,000

tribution of food in many areas of the country (Piraeus Suburbs included). Additionally, the neo-fascist squads effectively communicated their “protective” mission against the “foreign-led” criminality, particularly in metropolitan areas with large immigrant populations (Georgiadou / Rori 2014).

The electoral geography of GD in Attica tells the same story: The party’s stronghold in each of the five national elections of the period 2012–2019 was West Attica (Table 4). This is also the regional unit with the most distinct socio-economic profile (Table 5). GD’s performance was also remarkably good (at least before Fyssas’s murder) in Piraeus Suburbs, an area

with similar socio-economic characteristics (high unemployment rates, lower incomes, and a lower share in high-qualified jobs).

### THE SITUATION AT THE ENTERPRISE LEVEL

Given the prominence of the neo-fascist tide within the working-class neighbourhoods, trade unions have many reasons to worry. Apart from the overt anti-communist, racist, and nationalist ideology, GD directly draws from the interwar national socialist legacies of anti-unionism, while its paramilitary

Table 4  
GD’s electoral geography in Attica Region (%)

	2012 May	2012 June	2015 Jan	2015 Sep	2019 July
Municipality of Athens	8.8	7.8	7.1	6.9	3.1
Municipality of Piraeus	8.8	8.3	7.6	7.8	3.2
Northern Suburbs	5.3	4.9	4.9	4.3	1.8
Southern Suburbs	6.3	5.8	5.4	5.1	2.2
South-Eastern Suburbs	6.6	6.4	5.8	5.7	2.5
Western Athens	7.8	7.4	6.3	6.6	2.9
Piraeus Suburbs	9.1	8.8	7.3	7.9	3.5
East Attica	8.7	8.7	7.9	7.8	3.2
West Attica	12.5	13.4	10.1	11.3	4.6
Salamis Island	12.4	12.6	11.1	11.7	4.9
Other Islands	9.0	8.1	6.8	8.1	3.0
Attica Region	7.9	7.6	6.7	6.7	2.9

Source: Bithymitris and Koustenis (2022)

Table 5  
Social differentiation of Piraeus, Piraeus Suburbs, and West Attica

		Attica Region	Piraeus	Piraeus Suburbs	West Attica
Unemployment Rate 2011 ( per cent)		18.0	19.6	21.6	23.2
Avg. Annual Income 2011 (in Euros)		24,082	22,071	19,125	18,746
Real estate values 2007 (in Euros/m <sup>2</sup> )		1,400	1,450	950	750
Education Level	Up to Primary (%)	32.3	31.4	38.4	46.9
	Secondary/ post-secondary (%)	45.6	49.7	49.1	43.4
	University or higher (%)	22.2	18.9	12.5	9.7
Occupational Skill Level	High Skilled occupations (%)	27.8	23.3	17.4	14.1
	Middle Skilled occupations (%)	44.6	49.9	49.1	39.3
	Low Skilled occupations (%)	27.6	26.8	33.4	46.6

Source: Christodoulou et al. (2022)

structure foretells the violent activism against migrants and other perceived opponents. Despite some opportunistic references to labour struggles, such as the one concerning the 9-month strike (November 2011 – July 2012) in the Greek steel company “Hellenic Halyvourgia” (Bithymitris 2016), the dismissive attitude towards the official union organisation (“ergatopateres” as pejoratively called by GD’s leadership to denote uncompromising paternalism), and the aggressive practices against militant unionism cannot be missed.<sup>5</sup> Within the 7 years of the party’s presence at the parliament, GD frequently attacked unions and unionists with both hate speech and legal action: For instance, in 2017 the party initiated a lawsuit against the unions representing the public broadcasting sector. Equally explicit is the systematic support that the GD parliamentary group offered to the industrialists and the ship owners in the period from 2012–2019. The following words of a GD Member of Parliament (MP) in August 2015 are indicative:

*We as Golden Dawn, as a popular movement, don’t believe in class struggle. We believe that all levels of the economy are the people. Employees and employers. Incentives need to be given to enterprises, to invest their earnings, to hire employees.*

Rizospastis, 2015

It is not by chance that GD was self-proclaimed as guarantor of the social peace in Perama shipyards, a workplace that has been strategically selected as a bastion for the nationalist interference with organised labour. Despite their anti-capitalist rhetoric, the extreme right historically operates as a reminder of the class hierarchies that workers should abide, and this was made evident a few days before the assault on the communist leadership of the local union in September 2013, when a GD’s activist (and foreman in a local shipyard) stated in a very characteristic fashion:

*The wages that we were taking 2 or 3 years before were just too high, if you consider the crisis. We could reduce them by ourselves and assure Greek ship owners that if they bring their ships here, we will stop the strikes that happen all the time for all those years.*

Jail Golden Dawn, 2015

This statement has been amplified at the local level in order to prove how rational would be for a worker to join the far-right’s professional network. Even though their attempt to build a new union failed, and while the party’s operations ceased after GD was convicted of being a criminal organisation in October 2020, ex-members and activists carry on their anti-union tasks individually, as collaborators (foremen, bodyguards, or bullies) of the big business. The recent threats against the life of the President of the Association of Dockworkers, Markos Bekris, and the creation of a “yellow” union under the auspices of Cosco’s contractors clearly shows that the extreme-right danger to the labour movement remains relevant (Newmoney 2022). Moreover, academic scholars and Greek unionists alike are concerned that nationalist politics have not been effectively kept at bay, as can be seen in the law and order sector as well as with ongoing exclusion of migrants and refugees. Moreover, there is concern that nationalist politics have become embedded in the features of big trade union organisations, particularly those whose leadership is associated with the ND’s current conservative government. After all, the inclusiveness of a trade union movement, whose typical union member and union leader is a tenured public sector worker who is a member of a special social insurance scheme, predominantly male, middle-aged, and exclusively Greek (Matsaganis 2013: 29) is at least debatable (see also, Karakioulafi et al. 2020; Papanikolopoulos et al. 2018).

Table 6 gives an overview of the most important attacks of the extreme right against the working class and the organised labour within the last ten years. Although the list should not be considered exhaustive, it includes all those anti-labour activities of GD that have been documented during the trial. We have also added some occasions of nationalist anti-union or anti-labour practices that supplement the detailed accounts of the criminal activities as presented during the GD’s trial. Apart from a short description and the timeframe, we categorised the cases by activity type, and we also stressed the most important consequences of the recorded actions. The large unions relevant here are GSEE, ADEDY, and the All-Workers Militant Front (PAME; *Panergatiko Agonistiko Metopo*). For the sake of brevity, we refer to left-aligned parties when there is engagement of both KKE and SYRIZA.

## TRADE UNIONS’ PROBLEM PERCEPTION

Though union internal affairs, political processes, and socio-economic changes should not be considered isolated, each level of analysis has a certain de-

<sup>5</sup> The statute of the party explicitly draws from the Third Reich’s ideological attack on both the bourgeoisie and organised labour: “Those few that have abandoned their organic relationship with the people are the members of the ‘plutocratic oligarchy’, with their cosmopolitanism and the members of the guiding groups of the ‘bolshivist party syndicalist oligarchy’, with their internationalism. The oligarchies of money and the party tyranny are the same. Enemies of the Nation and the People” (Golden Dawn 2018). In other official party documents, this dual polemic is embellished with anti-semitism (Bithymitris / Koustenis 2022).

Table 6

**Overview of the fascist actions targeting labour unions and the working class (2011–2022)**

Short Description	Year	Type of Action	Result
Strike-breaking activity at the Volos plant of Hellenic Halyvourgia (Bithymitris 2016).	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Strike-breaking campaign</li> <li>– Drawing of boundary lines between employees of two different plants</li> </ul>	Among other reasons, the failure of the 9-month strike has been attributed to GD's sowing division in the factory. At the end of the day, GD proclaimed itself to be part of the wider anti-austerity movement that supported the strikers.
Fascist unionists from the Bus Drivers' Union provoked the police forces at the parliament during a 48-hour strike in June 2011 (Hekimoglou 2013).	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anti-strike provocative action</li> </ul>	The large-scale coercion in the advent of the fascist provocation resulted in the death of the unionist Dimitris Kotzaridis, 53, member of the communist-led Union of Construction Workers.
Murder of Alim Abdul Manan, worker from Bangladesh, 21, in Kato Patisia, Athens (Politi 2021).	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Racist murder</li> </ul>	Anti-fascist campaign by small left-wing unions, such as the Panhellenic Association of Scientists and Technicians.
OAED for Greeks: Employment agency for Greeks in difficulty. According to Golden Dawn's announcement, any unemployed Greek or employers who wish to recruit Greeks, may contact a local office of the party so as to register in the relevant job search lists (Proto Thema 2012).	2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Discriminatory practice</li> <li>– Wage dumping</li> </ul>	Inspections from state agencies in two cases showed that the operation was an empty shell, mostly serving as propaganda for the party and offering a limited number of low paid jobs through informal networks.
Assault and torture of an Egyptian worker by a fascist employer at Salamis. The worker had previously claimed that he had not been paid his due wages (CNN 2016).	2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Racist assault</li> <li>– Employer violence</li> <li>– Attack on union activists and anti-racists at Salamis Labour Centre five years later</li> </ul>	Four fascists were sentenced in 2016. The Labour Centre of Salamis and anti-racist organisations publicly demonstrated against the extreme-right terror.
Physical attack against three Pakistani construction workers in Ierapetra, Crete (Dionelis 2020).	2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Racist assault</li> </ul>	Five fascists were sentenced in 2014.
Guns fired at migrant farm workers at Manolada strawberry fields by foremen. The workers had previously claimed that they had not been paid their due wages (Vithoukias 2013).	2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Racist assault</li> <li>– Severe forms of exploitation</li> <li>– Human trafficking</li> </ul>	28 wounded workers were taken to the hospital. Leftist political parties, KEERFA, and three big unions publicised the case. According to a study by an EU agency, Manolada has been documented as an exceptional case of severe forms of labour exploitation (Chrysochoou 2014).
Nationalist campaign by an extreme-right faction of the Bus Drivers' Union and ideological attack against the Union (Hekimoglou 2013).	2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anti-unionism</li> </ul>	The union blocked the visit of GD's MPs to the workplaces. Bus transportation and taxi services are the only occupational domains that GD achieved some sort of organised union activity.
Near-fatal attack against Egyptian fishermen in Neo Ikonio, Perama (Pliakos 2017).	2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Anti-migrant violence</li> </ul>	It was the first big shock in the area. An escalation of fascist violence followed.



Murder of the worker from Pakistan Shehzad Luqman, 27, in Petralona, Athens (Demetis 2020).	2013	– Racist murder	Anti-fascist commemorations organised by the Pakistani community, KEERFA, and small left-wing unions.
Near-fatal attack against the President of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus as well as unionists and members of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) at Perama Zone (Rizospastis 2013).	2013	– Anti-communism assault – Anti-unionism	In the wake of the attack, and particularly after the murder of P. Fyssas, a broad anti-fascist coalition (led by the Union of Metalworkers) blocked any fascist initiative at the grassroots level. The penetration of organised labour in the Piraeus Suburbs failed.
Murder of Pavlos Fyssas, 34, left-wing rapper and member of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus (Mandora 2022).	2013	– Murder with political motives	Anti-fascist campaigns, mobilisations and commemorations by anti-racist organisations and a vast array of both large and local unions.
Creation of a nationalist union at Perama Ship Repair Zone (Tsimitakis 2015).	2015	– Dividing practices against existing trade unions – Wage dumping	The nationalist union was never fully operational and soon withered away. It mostly served as propaganda for the party. Only a small part of the employers recognised it and it did not have any institutional implications.
GD organises a congress for nationalist trade unions in a number of occupations (ship repair workers, farmers, taxi drivers, lawyers, doctors, merchants, electricians, and pensioners) (JailGoldenDawn 2017).	2016	– Dividing practices against existing trade unions	Like so many other fascist-led labour actions, the congress basically served propaganda objectives. ADEDY and other smaller unions protested against this initiative in a proactive fashion.
GD initiates a lawsuit against the unions in the public broadcasting sector (The Press Project 2017).	2017	– Anti-unionism	The union openly challenged the “right to deliver hate speech” by blocking the broadcasting of the GD leaders’ speeches and public interventions.
Physical attack and threats against the President of the Union of Dockworkers at Piraeus Port (Newmoney 2022).	2018	– Anti-unionism	In the wake of the union’s victorious industrial action, the leadership became the target of threats and attacks from foremen, bodyguards, and armed gangs. KKE and PAME demonstrated their solidarity.
Fire destroys 15 huts in a migrant worker settlement in Manolada, without clear evidence on the cause, though the living conditions in self-made sheds contributed to the expansion of the fire (eKathimerini 2018).	2018	– Severe forms of exploitation	PAME and KKE have devoted resources to get in touch with the migrants. In 2022, a joint festivity was organised locally.
Physical attack against the Bangladeshi farm worker Odin Bilal from his employer at Vartholomio, Peloponnese. The worker had previously claimed that he had not been paid his due wages (Kalafatis 2020).	2020	– Employer violence – Racist assault	Raising awareness campaign from KEERFA, leftist political parties, and other left-wing organisations.

Source: Christodoulou et al. (2022)

gree of relative autonomy. Moving our analysis to the level of union response, it is useful to bear in mind that despite the conflictual character of union politics in Greece (which culminated in the years 2019–2021, whereby GSEE practically ceased its industrial activity), all the competing factions demonstrated a solid stance against neo-fascism, albeit with varying degrees of efficiency and proactive behaviour.

It would be fair to note though that up until the escalation of the extreme-right violence in 2013 (see Table 6), the official unions, and especially GSEE, paid little attention to the first worrying signs of the neo-fascist tide. Even militant unions, such as the Steelworkers' Union of Hellenic Halyvourgia (Bithymitris 2016), responded with some delay to the divisive tactics of GD on the occasion of the emblematic 9-month strike of the steelworkers. The first racist lethal assaults against migrant workers between 2011 and 2013 led to increased awareness among trade unionists, but the response was mostly limited to leftist and small labour collectives and unions with limited mobilisation resources. The top-level unions entered the fight wholeheartedly only after the nearly fatal attack against the unionists of Perama Ship Repair Zone in September 2013. It should be noted that the vast majority of GD's violent actions were carried out between 2011 and 2013 (Kafe et al. 2018).

It was the murder of the left-wing young rapper and member of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus, Pavlos Fyssas, 34, that set the stage for a coalition building strategy between anti-racist organisations, lawyers, journalists, academics, political parties, militant unions, labour collectives, and the big unions of the private and public sector. Without the numerous anti-fascist events organised locally and nationally from this ad hoc coalition, the readiness of many unionists, and the legal services of their organisations, the terror of the GD's death squads could have even more devastating results within the working-class districts, and the workplaces of Piraeus, and beyond. Most importantly, the belated response of the state to the escalation of the extreme-right violence would probably have been even more delayed given the notorious relationships with some of the party's members with the police forces.

There is no question that the crisis decade threatened the very existence of the Greek trade union ecosystem. What most unionists failed to see from the outset of the crisis was that the extreme right was not only a plebiscitarian, archaic, and spontaneous response of the most dispossessed segments of the Greek society, but also and most importantly a golden

opportunity for anti-labour coercion and a mechanism of employer domination. The obsession of the GD's leadership with the "protection" of the heavy industry of Piraeus (be it the port economy or the ship building industry), which also reflected fantasies of occupying the "red fortresses" where the Nazis suffered major losses in WWII (i.e., Kokkinia), is one side of the strategy for a revival of authoritarian corporatism in the ruins of democratic unionism. This is in line with the historical experience of interwar fascism; the first targets are the militant unions, and the rest follow. The readiness of some employers at Perama shipyards and beyond (connections of Cosco's contractors with right-wing activists included) to accommodate extreme right in the pursuit of minimizing union bargaining, is the other side of a much-desired authoritarian corporatism that has not prevailed but is still on the table.

Apart from the extreme right's attempt to hegemonise the ship repair industry, introducing itself as the intermediary between the thousands underemployed workers of Perama and the ship owners, we should not ignore that there is an even more dislocated workforce in the countryside (the undocumented migrants) that employers are not exactly eager to see unionise. It is not by chance that severe labour exploitation thrives among migrant workers in rural areas who are cut off from any union representation (Chrysochoou et al. 2014).

## TRADE UNION EXPERIENCE AND AREAS OF ACTION

It would be unfair to suggest that the problems faced by the migrant communities stemming either from employers' overexploitation or extreme-right practices pass totally unnoticed from the big trade unions. Migration is a core thematic area of the biggest second-level organisation, the Labour Centre of Athens (EKA; *Ergatikó Kéntro Athínas*). Specifically, the Migrant Point EKA was set up in May 2006 in collaboration with the GSEE Institute of Labour (INE GSEE). The Migrant Point EKA aims to support migrants and refugees to have equal access to labour and social rights. Beneficiaries can be individuals (migrants and refugees) or groups of individuals that need labour market information, guidance, empowerment, or legal advice against discrimination and other issues occurring at the workplace. In some cases, the migrant communities contact the structure and ask for consultancy. Apart from the support of INE GSEE, the structure has also been supported by the Union Migrant Net, an initiative launched by ETUC and ECTUN (Bithymitris 2021a).

PAME established a special secretary working with refugees and migrants, with the aim to facilitate the organisation of migrants and refugees in unions (e.g., most of the union's announcements are published in several languages). The big unions are aware of the problem of recurrent violence against the less organised workforce, especially in rural areas. GSEE has devoted resources (i.e., legal advice from KEPEA, Information Center for Employees & Unemployed) to support the migrant farm workers, whilst PAME has contributed to the awareness raising on employer and racist violence in Manolada, the most notorious case. In July 2022, the secretariat of PAME coordinated the action of three local unions and the Coordinating Committee of Manolada farm workers, which jointly organised a successful festival with the participation of hundreds of migrant workers

However useful such actions are, the alliance of the exploitative bosses with the local police outweighs their impact. More community-based initiatives are needed (GSEE falls short of such tasks), along with awareness raising actions at the EU level (for instance, the utilisation of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and other international bodies in the human rights domain). International union bodies should also be more actively engaged under the guidance of the national and local unions (the case of PAME and WFTU joint intervention in Manolada is a good example of global/local action). The internationalisation of the problem, coupled with localised joint interventions could raise substantially the costs borne from attacks against labour, be it physical assaults, wage dumping practices, or severe exploitation forms. Although organised racist, xenophobic, or overtly anti-union practices have been diminished after the imprisonment of GD's leadership, the diffusion of such practices through informal networks, and more importantly, the activation of "yellow" unionism cast their threatening shadow over the working class (we already stressed the Dockworkers' case; there is at least one more major case of "yellow" unionism in the making among employees of the private security services that for the moment GSEE and PAME have kept at bay; see Kathimerini 2013).

Overall, the failure of GD to establish its own viable organisational networks within existing trade unions or to create new nationalist unions that would resemble the official *ethnikofron* post-civil war unionism should be widely discussed among the opposing factions of GSEE and ADEDY. It is a positive experience that should not be taken for granted. Fascists had all the boxes ticked for a hegemonic encroachment on the Greek working class: The indignation of

the popular strata against the inefficiency of the political system to respond to the worst economic crisis in a non-war period (the collapse of the levels of confidence towards parties and unions in Greece has been documented by numerous surveys); the indignation against the global and European neoliberal forces that made things more complicated from the onset of the Greek crisis; the precarisation of workers' lives; the aggravation of feelings of insecurity particularly within the most disadvantaged areas of the country, which are also the most populated by migrant labourers; the institutional erosion of collective regulation, coupled with an unprecedented encroachment on union resources; a further retrenchment of the welfare state; solid connections between GD and the police forces; and a potential for further collaboration between big business in metropolitan areas and smaller employers in the countryside. Despite all of these factors, they failed.

If the socialist, conservative, communist, and radical left factions were more tolerant towards extreme-right practices within organised labour, GD would probably have found room for manoeuvring within existing unions and likely would have reaped more fruits from their impressive electoral performance in the period from 2012–2015. The party's resorting to escalating violence in 2013, particularly in the sensitive areas of Piraeus Suburbs, cannot be disconnected from its inability to foster and secure bonds with traditional working-class audiences in an anti-union, anti-communist, and exclusivist direction. This, in turn, would not happen without the systematic intervention of unions at the local working-class communities. Both the union interventions and the consistent anti-racism of KEERFA, along with other anti-racist organisations, played pivotal role in exposing the criminal activities of the extreme right. The subsequent section makes some recommendations for community-based unionism.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Greek trade unions encountered multiple existential threats during the last decade, including an economic crisis with a far-reaching social impact, austerity-driven policy measures, the deregulation of the labour market, and the erosion of collective bargaining structure. All of these have been discussed in detail by a number of academic and non-academic scholars. What has been less attended is the response of the trade unions to the worrying rise of the extreme right in crisis-ridden Greece. GD has been declared a criminal organisation and its leaders are imprisoned, however, the xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-union

practices and the agents enacting these hateful practices have not vanished. Anti-immigrant sentiment is still present (though weakened) among the Greek society, severe forms of labour exploitation are still documented (GSEE did a good job in exposing employers' foul play after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; see Bithymitris 2021a: 5), and "yellow" unionism promises to supersede existing union apparatuses. Moreover, top-level unions continue to see immense gaps in representation.

Though the Greek trade unions have been solidly anti-fascist in their alignment, keeping at bay the divisive attempts of nationalism, the positive experience of fighting GD at the grassroots level has yet to be transmitted. Almost ten years after the near fatal assault on unionists and the murder of Pavlos Fyssas by a GD death squad, big confederations are still hesitant to reflect on why the fascists targeted the Piraeus Suburbs and what conditions contribute to their potential defeat. The communication channels between the unions and the anti-racist agents, communities of Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) people, and youth progressive collectives that exposed the criminal objectives of the GD in a timely manner need to be restored and improved. On the ten year anniversary of Fyssas's murder, a conference co-organised by the large unions in the GSEE, such as the Labour Centre of Athens and the Labour Centre of Piraeus, along with PAME unions, anti-racist organisations, ethnic communities, academic scholars of the extreme right, and journalists, could signal what is implicitly asserted: The ideological disputes, however necessary from a revitalisation perspective, should not impinge on organised labour's readiness to confront extreme right both in its typical form (party and union organisational presence) and its unofficial, non-typical manifestations.

The working classes, and the dispossessed and precarious segments of the working class in particular, will continue to attract the attention of nationalist actors. Community-based union practices can be fruitful at promoting solidarity and labour internationalism, but may also provide some sort of protection for the most vulnerable members of the working class. Cultures of solidarity should be revived with the active participation of employees whose class status is relatively secure, but they have reasons to feel as though they exist between the precariat and the affluent, educated middle classes. In this vein, the feeling of being insecure, even among the less dispossessed segments of the working classes, should be counteracted through joint initiatives for restoring the country's welfare system.

The extreme right took advantage of the collapse of social welfare in crisis-ridden Greece, offering some superficial, propaganda-driven, exclusivist, and tangible services to the impoverished popular neighbourhoods. Unions should put the substantial improvement of the welfare state (the public health system is under siege again), the narrowing of income inequalities that are once more on the rise, and most importantly the support of vocational education high on their agenda. The recurring discussions on the chronic weakness of the vocational education and training (VET) system to respond to the needs of those who cannot afford for higher education (Nektarios et al. 2022) depict the abandonment of working-class youth in the most acute way. These youth have many reasons to feel resentment and the unions should do more to support them, or else right-wing populism will attract an even larger sympathetic audience.

The experience of the Union of Metalworkers of Piraeus provides important insight on this matter. Successful vocational training initiatives and a commitment to collective bargaining, on the one hand, and support of the unemployed workers and grass-roots anti-fascist interventions, on the other, minimised the capacity for activists to undertake and perform regular union tasks. Under the auspices of the union confederations, local unions should draw from this experience and organise campaigns in the neighbourhoods where their actual and potential membership lives, starting with a needs analysis. Given the context of rising energy poverty, it is possible that nationalists will try to take advantage of poor people's despair, especially in Northern Greece.

It should be noted that not all the employers hold anti-migrant attitudes. Unions located in rural areas should jointly open communication channels with employer and farmer associations to promote the integration of migrants, the stigmatisation of exclusionary politics, and to prevent severe forms of exploitation. Nevertheless, unions should not lose sight of the fact that employer-driven xenophobic attacks against migrants have been recorded since the 1990s (Kafe et al. 2018). This means that wider and sustainable synergies are needed if unions are to promote the protection of the most vulnerable members of the working-class. Universities and research institutes could offer useful documentation regarding the state-of-the-art.

Related to the previous point, unions should open a dialogue with the government and the political parties over the notorious cases of police collaboration with agents of anti-labour practices (ranging from

discrimination to overt violence). Again, not all the police officers are anti-democratic or condone anti-migrant practices. But the indications of police tolerance of racist and discriminatory actions are too many to be neglected by the unions. The engagement of the police unions is of utmost importance here.

Finally, no anti-nationalist, democratic coalition will be victorious without a deep commitment to democratic participation at the grassroots level. Previous research has shown the huge difficulties in mobilisation and collective representation due to serious institutional weaknesses in third-level organisations (Bithymitris 2021a) as well as the far-reaching effects of the fragmentation within the Greek union movement. As shown in previous sections, the union density is still on the decline, though some level of restoration of collective bargaining has been achieved. Industrial action has showed some signs of revival as well, with GSEE, ADEDY, and PAME joining forces to prepare for a strike on November 9, 2022. The victorious struggles of the Dockworkers of Piraeus, and the e-Food workers, both precarious and organised, are unmistakable signs of the great potential of union revitalisation. The latter is also a precondition for a lasting defeat of nationalism within the trade union movement in Greece and beyond.

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## ABOUT THE AUTORS

**Giorgos Bithymitris**, PhD is a researcher at the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE) in Athens, with expertise in social stratification. His current research interest focuses on working-class identities and nationalism in a crisis and post-crisis context.

**Argyris Biskinis** is a research assistant and postgraduate student at Lancaster University, UK.

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**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e. V.**

Godesberger Allee 149  
53175 Bonn | Germany  
Email: [info@fes.de](mailto:info@fes.de)

Issuing department:  
International Cooperation | Global and European Policy

Responsible for content and editing:  
Dr Marc Meinardus | European Trade Union and Social Policy  
[marc.meinardus@fes.de](mailto:marc.meinardus@fes.de)

Design/Typesetting: [pertext](http://pertext.de), Berlin | [www.pertext.de](http://www.pertext.de)

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