ABSTRACT for the "International Solidarity Reloaded / Trade Unions and other Social Movements: Between the Challenges and Opportunities of Globalisation" Graduate Conference, 2014.

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TITLE: International Solidarity in austerity times: The case of the Greek labor organizations and their European allies.

ABSTRACT: The public debt crisis that struck the European South, in the aftermath of the 2008 Lehman Brothers collapse, provided unique opportunities for trade unions to play a leading role in each country's political and social scene, as the austerity measures adopted brought back to the top of each country's movement agenda labor-related and material claims. Yet, for union members and researchers working on the labor movement alike, the crisis years proved to be a major disillusionment. Despite a (30-year-long) scholarly debate on the "unions being in crisis" and the respective proposals for the unions' revitalization, it is beyond any doubt that the labor organizations' presence was weaker than ever when it came to blocking austerity measures and negative changes in the labor legislation, as well as protecting their members' rights and living standards.

In this sense, the case of Greece is an excellent example to study when addressing the question "*what went wrong?".* The Greek institutional trade unions, socially discredited and isolated from the broader social movement environment, lost each and every major battle they engaged into, despite the population's massive anti-austerity mobilization. Furthermore, notwithstanding the fact that Greece moved into the center of international attention and many benevolent attempts were made to construct workers' solidarity networks in a trans-national basis, few steps were made from the Greek trade union elites in this direction.

However, if one takes a closer look at the Greek case, it is evident that not all developments are as negative as the ones depicted above. Under the, relatively calm, institutional surface, there's a whole constellation of small- and mid-level labor organizations developing innovative forms of workers' organizing and collective action. These entities, ranging from neighborhood workers' clubs (interestingly similar to the ones depicted in Fine, 2006) to grassroots corporate unions of precarious workers (Vogiatzoglou, 2011), present, amongst others, the following characteristics: (a) A focus on workers' mutualism and building social solidarity structures; (b)a very explicit attempt to construct networks of cooperation with non-

labor related Social Movement Organizations; (c) an equally important focus on identifying and approaching potential allies in the trans-national level (d) a turn towards what has been termed as *social movement unionism* (Turner, 2007).

Commencing from the above, this paper employs a dual analytical perspective:

On the one hand, it examines the *experimental laboratories* of trade unionism in Greece, in an attempt to identify if and to what extent the organizational patterns and collective action repertoire of the latter may propose a viable alternative to the traditional trade union structure.

On the other hand, it delineates three types of transnational inter-movement networks: (a) *coordinative*, where organizations choose a given point in time and/or space to jointly perform their collective action; (b) *solidarity transfer* of material and immaterial resources from one entity to another; (c) *collaborative*, where the organizations actively engage in a mutual exchange of resources, know-how, and experience. The question brought forward is which transnational networking types the various Greek labor entities participate in and to what extent their efforts have been successful.

A fundamental argument of this article is that the two research questions are inevitably intertwined, as in a highly internationalized socio-economic environment, attempting to redefine the role of the trade union in the contemporary society will obligatorily involve questioning its alliances' strategies, at the local and the international level. The empirical data confirm our initial hypothesis: the *experimental laboratories*, having invested their resources in building the third network type (collaborative networks), produced the most concrete outcomes. Contrarily, the efforts of the institutional trade unions, which mostly focused on co-ordinating their action with their European counterparts, were not met with success.

The empirical material used in the paper derives from the research I have been conducting during the last 6 years and includes an extensive set of interviews with union members and officials, participatory observation and archive research in the labor organizations' written material.

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AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO:

I am currently writing my PhD at the European University Institute (Florence, Italy).

The title of the PhD is "Precarious Workers' Unions in Greece and Italy: A comparative research on their organizational characteristics and movement repertoire". Hopefully, it won't be as boring as it sounds. I 'm trying to analyze and propose models of grassroots unionism for the precarity era. In the long term, I would like this project to prove more useful for the unions themselves, than for the academic community. My supervisor is Donatella della Porta.

In the past, I studied Sociology at Panteion University (Athens, Greece) and was awarded a Master's in Sociology – with a specialization in Social Movements – from the University of Crete (Rethymnon, Greece).

I have also worked as call-center operator, wanna-be manager in an advertising company (that was a total failure), junior accountant, video store clerk, leaflet distributor, and so on.

Before moving out of Greece, I was an active unionist in the call-center sector, having co-founded, participated in and served as a Board Member of various grassroots trade unions.

You may find my full CV, publications and other activities HERE.