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Union militancy during economic hardship: The strike at the Greek steel company

“Hellenic Halyvourgia”

Giorgos Bithymitris

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Union militancy during economic hardship

The strike at the Greek steel company “Hellenic Halyvourgia”

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Giorgos Bithymitris

*Department of Political Science and History, Centre for Political Research,
Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the preconditions of the strike at the Greek steel company Hellenic Halyvourgia (HH) which started on 1 November 2011 and ended on 28 July 2012. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of current labour disputes in the context of economic crisis focusing on previous developments of mobilisation theory and social movement literature. The overall aim is to highlight the linkages between trade unions and society when a broader sense of injustice comes to the fore.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative methods were employed in order to contextualise the strike events and examine the preconditions of the occurrence and the volume of the strike. Semistructured interviews, field notes, interviews taken by the media, documentaries, chronicles and articles, constructed the main body of empirical material.

Findings – The HH case indicates that certain collective identities and leadership qualities account for high mobilisation potential with spillover effects which are in turn conditioned upon the situation of the strikers' allies. Although there was an agency to transform the sense of injustice into collective action, the framing processes employed by the union did not have the kind of impact that would render state and management's responses ineffective, as the strike message did not eventually penetrate other industries or even the rest factories of the HH.

Originality/value – The present paper goes beyond the general description of the social turmoil during the Greek crisis by showing the critical bonds that were established through framing and identity-building processes among the strikers and the anti-austerity protesters in Greece and abroad.

Keywords Leadership, Crisis, Trade unions, Injustice, Strikes

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This paper explores the preconditions for the longest strike to take place in post-dictatorial Greece within an extremely harsh economic context. The strike at Hellenic Halyvourgia (HH) started on 1 November 2011 and ended on 28 July 2012, amounting to 272 strike days. On 31 October 2011, the General Assembly of the 353 steelworkers of HH voted to strike, challenging the dilemma posed by the employer: wage cuts of up to 40 per cent (as a result of working-time reductions) or 180 dismissals (Diakoptes, 2011). Implementing a multiform militant strategy, the HH Union (HHU) attempted to turn its strike into a cornerstone for the Greek labour movement. Despite its negative net outcome, the strike at HH stands out as the kind of labour struggle that enriches our understanding of “how individuals are transformed into collective actors who have the will and the capacity to create and sustain collective organization and to engage in collective action against their employers” (Kelly, 1998, p. 38), which is one of the central questions negotiated by mobilisation theory.

The aim of this study is to analyse the micro dynamics of a contemporary, lengthy and well-supported strike in the historical perspective of an unprecedented economic recession. Two analytical categories associated with mobilisation theory are employed



to construct our hypotheses about the determinants of the HH strike. First, the sense of injustice which emerged as a “deposit of collectivism” and counterbalanced various symptoms of sectionalism. Second, the quality of leadership. According to our research on the HH strike, these two factors accounted for two different levels of mobilisation potential: the incidence, which corresponds to the synchronic question “Why did it happen?”; and the durability of this multiform labour struggle, which corresponds to the diachronic question “How did it last?”.

2. Union militancy and mobilisation resources

The labelling of a union as militant or moderate should not be seen as a static categorisation but rather as a useful analytical tool for contrasting the different approaches adopted by unions (Darlington, 2009a, p. 4). Although the discussion on the effectiveness of each type of unionism lies at the heart of the contrasting paradigms, we shall focus on the constitutional issue of the preconditions for militancy in the so-called age of austerity (Schäfer and Streeck, 2013).

During the strike under examination, and in the aftermath of this struggle, the relations between labour, capital and the state were altered at both the micro and the national level. Although the power shifts are not addressed here, our attempt to explore the preconditions for union militancy paves the way for a further assessment of its implications regarding outcomes and results. The efficacy of a militant union strategy during periods of economic downturn also needs an empirical grounding well beyond the scope of this paper.

What can be discussed, however, is what allows militancy to emerge even as unions go through tough economic times. To do so, the present analysis builds on two interrelated conceptualisations; the first revolves around the sense of injustice and its “felt importance” (Frijda, 2004, p. 167). Badigannavar and Kelly (2011) and Buttigieg *et al.* (2008) perceive injustice as a key factor associated with higher levels of attitudinal militancy and pro-union attitudes. Johnson and Jarley (2004, p. 546) build upon a similar notion of workplace injustice, contrasting it with the procedural justice produced by the trade union. In a similar vein, we approach injustice in its inter-subjective content, as it is experienced by the strikers.

The second concept focuses on leadership as a crucial factor in the process of workers’ mobilisation. While examining briefly this concept in the way it is operationalised by social movement (SM) scholars (Fantasia, 1988; Barker *et al.*, 2001), special attention will be drawn to more recent detailed accounts of the dynamic interrelationship between workplace leadership and membership, particularly underlining the significance of left-wing leadership in trade union activity.

Starting from the seminal work of John Kelly (1998), mobilisation theory in industrial relations has endorsed the sense of injustice as a *sine qua non* of collective action. Leadership, organisational structure and strategic opportunity supplement the analytical canvas on the premises of labour mobilisation. Despite its originality, Kelly’s core argument has been challenged both empirically and methodologically. For instance, Atzeni (2009) challenges the centrality of the subjectively perceived notion of injustice in the process of collectivisation while he explores more spontaneous labour responses as part of on-going processes that lead to mobilisation. Instead of building on the individual and thus elusive sense of injustice, Atzeni (2009) stresses the importance of the “structured” solidarity as “a product of the conflicting nature of the employment relationship in capitalist societies” (p. 7). According to this approach, union leaders will not be able to sustain mobilisation unless they reframe working interests in collective terms and thus defend the space for reciprocal support and solidarity (Atzeni, 2009, p. 13).

Despite the above meaningful warnings on the overestimation of injustice as a determinant of collective action, our case could hardly be understood without examining the multiple levels of this inter-subjective and interactional notion. Certain SM theorisations on the making of collective identities may help us to avoid the pitfalls of a mechanical, predetermined movement from injustice to mobilisation. Although SM theory lacks a consensual definition of collective identities (Flesher Fominaya, 2010), there is common ground on theorising injustice as something that is inextricably tied to the identification of collective actors' interests as separate from those of other groups.

Among other major components that bind identities and structures together, we should distinguish the collective action frames, introduced by Goffman (1974, p. 21) as "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and elaborated further by various scholars of SM theory (Snow and Benford, 1988; Gamson, 1992; Johnston, 1995). Collective action frames perform their interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the "world out there", but in ways that are "intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 198). When successful, frames make a compelling case for the "injustice of a condition" and the likely effectiveness of collective agency in changing this condition (Polleta and Jasper, 2001, p. 291).

Using a classical formulation from Piven and Cloward (1977, p. 12), we support the idea that the framing processes that were performed by HHU symbolically transformed the social arrangements that ordinarily seem just and immutable to unjust and mutable, decisively forging the collective identity of the steelworkers and absorbing the decollectivising effects of a latent and sometimes explicit sectionalism. Although the great majority of HH employees supported the union claims, one should not ignore the division of the workforce into typical blue-collar (steelworkers) and white-collar (administrative employees) sections, with the latter being more attached to the employer's narrative on the dispute. The horizontal ideological sectionalism within the Greek union movement (Kouzis, 2007) has also been present during the HH strike with regard to HHU's fragile relations with the sector-based Metal Workers Federation (POEM) and the peak level organisation of Greek labour (GSEE). As stressed below, the ideological and social divisions are more explicit when comparing the collective identity developed in the plants run by the same company (HH) in Aspropyrgos and Volos/Velestino (hereby Volos). In line with McBride's argument on the positive effect that sectionalism may have on collective identity and solidarity among the workforce (McBride, 2011), the present analysis of the HH strike shows that the above dynamic and complex sets of intra- and inter-organisational relations did not postpone the social identification processes.

On the contrary, the constitutive dichotomy between "us" against "them", which is historically embedded in the Greek labour relations system and the wide range of connotations of this dichotomy in the crisis context strengthened those processes of social identification. Apparently, the widespread sense of injustice which culminated in Greece during the years 2010-2012 (Davou and Demertzis, 2013, p. 102) interacted with social struggles such as the HH strike. The political implications of both the strike and the broader social unrest are obvious too.

The two major parties – Nea Dimokratia and Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) – that implemented the austerity policies during the first five years of the crisis used to gather well over 80 per cent of the votes since the early 1970s; it was the so-called double earthquake election of 6 May and 17 June that led to the collapse of

their combined vote to less than a third (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis, 2014, p. 225). A more specific reading of the vote share at Aspropyrgos – the municipality where the HH strike took place – is much more revealing: the Communist Party (KKE), which turned this struggle into a flagship of its electoral campaign, received 14.5 per cent of the local vote, a 5.5 per cent growth since 2009 and 6 per cent higher than the party's national average. SYRIZA (Radical Left Coalition), the main opposition party after the double elections of 2012 and also a supporter of the strike, gained 12 per cent of the local vote, a 9 per cent growth in share since 2009[1]. The attempt by the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn (Chrysi Avgi) to gain advantage from its ambivalent support towards the strikers at Aspropyrgos was also mirrored in the party's local vote share of 13 per cent, a percentage almost twice as high as the national average. Many critiques against the HH strike used Golden Dawn's media event at the gates of HH as a rather unfair excuse to blemish the strike (Chasapopoulos, 2012a). It should be noticed though that Golden Dawn had fervently opposed the spreading of the strike to the other HH plant at Volos, accusing the pro-strikers of being enemies of the workers (TVXS, 2012).

This is not to suggest that the aforementioned configurations lacked contradictions: one could link the defeat of the strike with the recession of the anti-austerity movement after the national elections of 2012. A variety of reasons accompanied the decline in mobilisations: the re-alignment processes after the electoral win of the conservative party in June 2012 and the power shifts they entailed at national level; the protesters' frustration and financial exhaustion after two years of the protest cycle (Kousis and Kanellopoulos, 2014); the self-blaming patterns and the acknowledged guilt they invoked at the level of public belief (Davou and Demertzis, 2013, p. 114). It seems as if the greater asset of the HH strike – its interrelation with the anti-austerity protest cycle – was at the same time its Achilles' heel. The unevenness of the resonance of the strike itself should be particularly emphasised if it is to assess the strikers' defeat. Although the strikers attracted deep-seated support in the public sphere, the sector level and workplace unionism echoed their claims in only a vague way.

Going back to our theoretical concerns, although a sense of injustice within the workplace is important for interest identification, events or occurrences of injustice are not meaningful by themselves. Darlington summarises the contribution of mobilisation theory to the study of strikes and poses the importance of agency as: "Crucially a mechanism needs to exist, in the form of activist leadership which channels that discontent into collective action" (Darlington, 2014, p. 120).

3. The role of leadership and its political implications

Albeit necessary in some respects, the collective sense of injustice is not sufficient for the durable implementation of a militant strategy. There must also be "a leadership willing and able to mobilize members for action" (Kelly, 2006, p. 286). To be more specific, union leadership can set the stage for collective action against workplace injustice by enacting fair procedures and emphasising interactional justice in conducting day-to-day member relations (Johnson and Jarley, 2004, p. 546). According to the present analysis, union leadership constitutes the core agent of grievance framing, and thus the type of leadership should be adequately stressed and analysed.

Various studies in trade union literature are devoted to typologies of union leadership (Metochi, 2002, p. 92). Some of them stem from developments in organisational leadership literature, which employs the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). For instance Cregan *et al.* (2009) developed further the concept of transformational leadership and its

influence on a member's loyalty and willingness to work by means of its impact on the member's social identification: Union militancy during economic hardship

[...] transformational leaders are *charismatic*, exemplary and exceptional in relation to their peers [...]. Second, they arise from *within* the group [...]. Third, there is an emotional relationship between the leader and the group [...]. Finally, their role is to change the group by means of articulating a vision for the future (Cregan *et al.*, 2009, p. 705).

Building on a handful of studies that have explored the effects of leadership behaviour on union members (Batstone *et al.*, 1978; Fullagar *et al.*, 1992; Fosh, 1993; Kelloway and Barling, 1993; Metochi, 2002; Darlington, 2009a), it is assumed here that there is a critical link between the quality of union leadership and the implementation of a solid militant strategy. To put it more straight forwardly, the participatory leadership style (Fosh, 1993), assumed by the local leaders of HHU, encouraged members to take an interest and play a part in the union's strike activity.

As well as the local militant stewards, there were also cadres of left-wing activists outside the workplace who played a leading role during the strike. The alliance examined here resembles the case of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) Workers where, according to Darlington (2012), the network of representatives/activists displayed crucial leadership and organisational skills by "articulating workers' sense of injustice and targeting it at employers and the government, and advocating the need for strike action as an effective means of collective redress" (p. 526). Connolly and Darlington (2012) have drawn similar assumptions from the comparison between the French union *Solidaires Unitaires Democratiques-Rail* and the RMT union (p. 247).

Moreover, Darlington has underlined the significance of left-wing leadership (activists who have a fixed affiliation to a far-left political party or left-wing members of the Labour Party, or independent non-party militants who share class politics) in the process of worker collectivisation and activity (Darlington, 2009b). As indicated below, the ideological influence exerted by both an organised faction of communist industrial activists outside the workplace and, most importantly, the class-oriented militant union cadres of HHU shifted the continuum in favour of militancy.

To sum up, the main point concerning the mobilisation resources of a union such as HHU in tandem with its capacity to carry out a lengthy strike is that the leadership played a key role in confining the negative de-mobilising effects of sectionalism while forging a robust collective identity among the steelworkers.

4. Method

A qualitative approach was applied to data collection and analysis of mobilisation resources in the case of the HH strike. The two key factors under scrutiny – the sense of injustice and the leadership quality – have been operationalised through qualitative content analysis of a body of material stemming from individual and collective perceptions that constitute socially shared beliefs such as group beliefs (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 123). In particular themes, items and concepts were chosen as units of analysis combining elements from manifest and latent content analysis (Berg, 2001, pp. 238-258). Therefore the present analysis "is extended to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data" (Berg, 2001, p. 242) involving two tasks.

In the first place, the analysis was focused on the discourse of strikers, allies and opponents of the strike in order to demonstrate how this militant collective action par excellence tapped into the concept of injustice. The latter denotes a structure of emotions that were diffused among the Greek popular strata in the context of austerity policies.

Second, the analysis explored the following components: first, the discursive practices of the HHU leaders (reflected in items such as speeches, field interviews, press conferences, communications, slogans); and second, the discourse of the strikers (reflected in items such as field interviews and statements to the local media), aiming to assess the role of leadership in mobilising its constituents and supportive networks.

Then the collected material was structured upon themes linked to perceptions of unionism (e.g. “unionism is a necessity”), perceptions of leadership (e.g. “the leader is one of us”), and perceptions of socio-economic condition (e.g. “my colleagues and the Greek people are not to blame”).

The above communities of shared meanings and perceptions were obtained during and after the strike through in-field interviews, media analysis, field notes, speeches given by the HHU leaders, communications released by the union, the employer and the parties engaged in the dispute. To be more specific, 14 one-on-one semistructured interviews were conducted (three union representatives and 11 steelworkers) exploring social identities and leadership issues such as perceptions of unionism, assessments of the leadership’s handling, ideological considerations, shifts on individual values and political attitudes. Field notes have also been gathered by observation of a general assembly (13 speeches delivered by HHU members and one delivered by the HHU chairman), which indicated the dynamics of the cleavages between the “hardliners” and the “conciliators”.

The material that derived from the media during the period between November 2011 (beginning of the strike) and July 2012 (end of the strike) was a result of daily documentation mainly from eight newspapers (*Rizospastis*, *Kathimerini*, *Avgi*, *Ethnos*, *Ta Nea*, *To Vima*, *Eleftherotypia* and *Epohi*) and four information portals (*Proto Thema*, *Skai*, *TVXS*, *Indymedia*), which reported 259 events associated with the HH conflict. Other sources of public discourse and cultural resources as blogosphere, documentaries and chronicles were examined as well.

In no sense do we claim that the case of the HH strike is representative of every single militant strike in Greece or other countries suffering from an economic downswing. We do support the idea that mobilisation theory could critically enhance our understanding of how the various interplays between contemporary unions, employers, state and society become part and parcel of disruptive and, to a certain extent, unexpected labour upsurges.

5. Context

The 272 days strike of the HHU took place within an extremely turbulent economic environment. The increase in unemployment from about 8 per cent in 2007 to a staggering 27 per cent in 2013 has been an unprecedented negative record, while almost a third of the Greek population became at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Pouliakas, 2014, p. 2). Within this context, no one should be surprised by the result of the Eurobarometer Survey (TNS Political and Social, 2014) on working conditions, according to which Greece has the lowest rate of satisfaction at country level (16 per cent).

Austerity measures imposed by Greek governments, among other impacts, have led to violent dislocations in the industrial relations field (Kretsos, 2011, p. 268). Owing to this dramatic deterioration at the expense of labour, a broad sense of injustice has arisen, especially among the workers, the unemployed and the self-employed.

The ballot for the strike at HH – one of the biggest exporting steel industries in Greece – occurred within the above conflictual context. The strike started on 31 October 2011, when the 353 steelworkers at the main plant of HH voted to strike in

response to the management's intention to impose wage cuts and mass dismissals. The employer claimed that workers in his two plants (Aspropyrgos and Volos) had to work for five hours a day through November and December, because production "could not be absorbed" from a full eight-hour shift in both plants (Kousta, 2012).

Flexibilisation of working time and deep cuts in workers' income (up to 20 per cent) would be the by-product of this proposal which, according to the management, was safeguarding employment positions. The general assembly of the local union located at Volos (HHUV) voted in favour of the measures and the two neighboring plants in Volos and Velestino plants continued to operate. The Aspropyrgos union which is studied here (HHU) proposed continuing strike action until the employer withdrew his claims, and a great majority of the steelworkers voted for the strike, challenging the controversial restructuring plan.

The strike proneness of the steelworkers at HH has remained relatively intact for nine months. During the sixth month of the strike, elections were held within the workplace, and the faction consisting of pro-strikers shared 90 per cent of the total vote. As confirmed by fieldwork observation, union opposition was at the forefront of anti-strike efforts. This core ranging from 30 to 50 employees (mainly executives, supervisors, clerks and a few workers) proved to be the generator of the counter-discourse, which contributed to the legitimisation of the extended violence which took place against the strikers in the name of "the right to work", as the Greek Prime Minister, Antonis Samaras, emphatically quoted on 24 July 2012 (Samaras, 2012). After a week of intensive police coercion in front of the HH plant, the assembly of the HHU voted to end the strike.

The defeat of the strike generated a post-conflict debate on the contingencies of labour militancy and its efficacy. This reflected a generalised frustration of the supporters of the strike, something that could be associated with the frustration of those who participated in the numerous anti-austerity collective actions of that period. Concerning the net outcome, the HHU's primary aims to cancel the layoffs and stop the deregulation were not accomplished. The management insisted on the need for downsizing because of the extremely reduced demand for steel products in Greece and abroad. By the summer of 2013, only 72 out of the 353 workers at HH were still in place, while similar rearrangements were implemented in other major Greek metal industries too. Furthermore, a barrage of restructuring measures in both Aspropyrgos and Volos reaffirmed the employer's willingness to take advantage of the post-conflict situation. The HH downsizing at both plants was accompanied by working-time deregulation and cost reduction.

In concluding this brief summary of events, the strike under scrutiny has been reported as the longest strike in the Greek industry at least since 1974, and it occurred during an unprecedented economic recession. The crisis has changed patterns of collective behaviour (Kousis and Kanellopoulos, 2014), although not in a symmetrical or cohesive way: despite the persistent calls by HHU for sectorial coordination, none of the big metal sector unions took the risk to strike in solidarity. Those inconsistencies in strike proneness remind us that the activation of worker consciousness during economic hardship is a complex and multi-factor issue, open to further examination.

6. The embedded sense of injustice, frames and social identities inside and outside the gates of HH

As has already been stressed, the triggering of the collective action described here has both structural and dynamic aspects, which can be analysed based on mobilisation theory underpinnings. Social injustice accounts for a more structural element of the collective actions undertaken at HH, echoing a broader social injustice apparent within Greek society.

Our findings from the content analysis of the discourse of workers at HH showed that the strikers were trying to justify their activities by establishing links between their unfair treatment and the broader social injustice. Regarding the unfair treatment, the machine operator K. stated emphatically: "Let me share with you a figure [...]. A minute of my productive work has paid my daily wage. An hour of my work has paid the wages of the whole section". Stove operator D. adds: "the value of my daily production is equivalent to the total wage of the whole plant. But my daily wage is 60€". However, it is worth noting that, in 2011, the daily salary of a skilled metal worker with the working experience of worker D. was 55€ (OMED, 2011).

Moreover, the income rates should be associated with the skills needed and the working conditions. A sense of injustice is well embedded in the workers of HH because of the rough working conditions they experience: "our demand is to protect collective agreements and wages. The conditions here are miserable, far from working in an office [...]. Since I am exposed to fire and steel, my salary cannot be 700€" (steelworker A.). Worker G. wonders: "when outside the plant the temperature is 104° F, inside it is 176°. Why should I work for 500€?". Incidents of bad injuries or even fatalities are not unfamiliar to the workers of HH: "We come here in the morning but we don't know whether we will return home or not. Last year our colleague came in the morning and at noon he was led to the cemetery" (worker G.). The lived experience of injustice has been expressed systematically by plenty of workers in a number of interviews conducted by journalists and the media (Diakoptes, 2011; PAME, 2012). Quoting a striker interviewed for the documentary of Theodosia Grammatikou on the HH strike, *Non Omnis Moriar*, "we are not on strike only for the workers of HH, nor just for those on strike, neither those that got fired, but for the whole of the working class" (Grammatikou, 2014).

The harsh working conditions coupled with the self-confidence of being extra productive constitute the raw material of a latent class consciousness which, under the given conditions of crisis, may lead to a self-understanding of a labour vanguard whose mission is to defend the collective rights of every Greek worker. During the assembly of 17 March, a steelworker, named Kyriakos, closed his inspiring speech likewise: "Our way, the way of saying NO, is the way that our people took at Polytechnio while resisting against the military junta. It is the way that our people took against the Fascist Occupation. Quoting the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet *If you don't burn, if I don't burn, if we don't burn, how will the darkness turn into light?*". The dramaturgy of the HH strike was pointing to the sentimental universe of the sympathisers continually raising the issue of injustice. During the aforementioned assembly, Michalis said: "we won't be the slaves of the 21st century. We are the steelworkers and will die like steelworkers. Here at this plant, we are betting our lives every day". The latter is strongly related to the undermining of the collective labour law that took place in Greece at that moment. As the plumber K. put it while I was interviewing him, "here lies a heavy industry [...]. A moment of distraction could cost lives. If we accept a 500€ wage, imagine what is going to happen to the rest of the workers". G.B., another worker, argues: "If those plans are to be implemented here, do you know what's going to be said? The steelworkers went on strike for 50 or 100 days and nothing happened – so surrender and get back to work". With the words of the Chairman of HHU, Giorgos Sifonios, "The HH strike is a lighthouse for the workers all over the world, because they are suffering too".

It was at this juncture that the HHU launched one of the most popular slogans of those days. The slogan Turn the whole country to Halyvourgia (Sifonios, 2012, p. 8) resonated with the emotional climate of the moment and multiplied the felt importance of HH injustice by projecting the broader sense of social injustice experienced by

thousands of Greek people. The function of frame bridging as a basic alignment process taps into the above interaction between structure and agency.

This major alignment function performed by HHU started achieving its strategic goals as various groups of people, unions and collectivities perceived the HH conflict as a fair struggle that denotes broader claims for social justice. The famous Greek actor Marios Athanasiou, during his interview with a mainstream entertainment TV channel, claimed support for the strike in this way bringing embarrassment to the panellists (Athanasiou, 2011). A few days later, one of the most popular stand-up comedians in Greece stated emphatically “we wish them (the strikers) to be strong because if the Steel start bending, then everything will take the wrong way around” (Lazopoulos, 2011). In a statement of support that was signed by more than 70 prestigious Greek artists (composers, singers, actors, directors, visual artists), it was mentioned: “the seven months of the heroic struggle of the steelworkers stands as a symbol for our people, for all those people who suffer” (*Rizospastis*, 2012, p. 27). According to the daily reporting of strike events, a total of 481 social and political organisations from Greece and abroad, mostly trade unions, expressed their solidarity with the HHU by sending money, foods, utilities or letters of support totaling 626 contributions (Table I).

The young worker J. highlighted this vanguard self-image strikingly: “this is a difficult workplace; it’s neither an office, nor a super market. You work shoulder to shoulder, watching so that no one will be hurt [...]. If I took 300€ or 400€ within this Dahau, within this inferno, how much should the security employees earn? They know that if we surrender, the rest will be defeated”.

As the framework of demands was not extremely ambitious, the union managed to present the employer as a stubborn and unreliable counterpart. According to the worker K. “we demand the recall of layoffs and an honest dialogue [...]. The solutions are feasible, provided that the firm is willing to find them [...]. They shall not stop; they want India’s and China’s wages”. A sense of distributive injustice was latent even before the economic crisis, in spite of the fact that HH’s owner was considered a rather modest boss. As the worker M. claims, “previously some men here made ends meet and there was plenty of money due to overtime, so they preferred to work rather than strike [...]. Now things have been violently changed”.

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Organization type	<i>n</i> (Contributions)	Valid per cent
Unions	360	57.51
Students’ unions	38	6.07
Political parties	34	5.43
Pupils’ associations	33	5.27
Solidarity associations	31	4.95
Pensioners’ unions	25	3.99
Small employers’ unions	15	2.40
Womens’ associations	14	2.24
Local government	12	1.92
Diaspora	12	1.92
Scientists	10	1.60
Artists	9	1.44
Farmers	8	1.28
Other	25	3.99
Total	626	100.00

Source: Data collected and processed by author

Table I.
Organisations which
supported the HH
strikers by type

To sum up, the implicit collectivist orientations of the HH steelworkers, coupled with: frustration from the employer's practices; and the broader anger that had accumulated in Greek society after a series of austerity measures provided the raw materials for the HH strike incident. However, none of the employer's practices could be disassociated from the union's strategy and tactics. The 272 days of the strike at HH showed that structural factors such as workplace conditions or social identities may explain the triggering of collective action but are hardly sufficient to explain the length of a strike. Social injustice invokes "felt importance" concerning the motivation and the collective action only if there is an agency to frame it. As already mentioned, the same restructuring proposal was submitted to the other plant of HH in Volos and was accepted by the local union (HHUV) who favoured a moderate attitude. So, why did workers at the Aspropyrgos plant react in such a militant way for such a lengthy period of time?

7. When politics and leadership matter: the issue of agency in HH

A further day-by-day examination of the discourse of the HHU leadership and its constituents brought to the fore the systematic attempt of the leaders to expose the unfair managerial and state practices regarding their rights and link them with the general exacerbation of social conditions.

Should those attempts have failed, neither the endurance nor the tension of the strike would be attainable. The role of union leadership in rapidly stressing the importance of the involvement of members emerges as a strong determinant for this unprecedented mobilisation potential. Leadership is approached here in terms of both personal and ideological-political properties. At the ground level, it was apparent to the observer that, beyond the personal leadership of the chairman of the HHU (organisational leadership), there was a collective leadership constituted by activists from other workplaces. Most of them were recognised at the HH as members of PAME (All Workers' Militant Front, a communist-led union coalition), whose contribution – organisational, financial and ideological – was perceived positively by the strikers. The ties of the organisational leaders with those "reservoirs" of militancy rendered them a major part of the vibrant network of representatives/activists which articulated the wider sense of injustice and therefore bears a striking resemblance to the commitments of RMT left activists described by Darlington (2009a).

Furthermore, the interdependent and successful coexistence of those two layers of leadership (intrinsic and extrinsic) is detected in the steelworkers' opinions. As it was put by the plumber S.: "I don't go along with PAME but it was simply the only party that supported us". Another worker, the worker J. adds: "Let's be honest: the KKE [Communist Party of Greece] and PAME are the only powers that stood by us. Without them at this crucial juncture we would yield". Other left-wing parties, movements and collectivities are also commemorated by another steelworker: "the left parties, first of all KKE, then SYRIZA and parties that represent the people's movement, the class of employees, youth, students: all of those parties represent us" (steelworker G.K.). The vice-president of the HHU, ex-voter of the socialist party, stated: "there is a compromised unionism and there is also PAME, which expresses great solidarity to the strikers, with food, and financial and moral support. Everyone is accepted though. Either socialist, or conservative, or radical left, just let them be here. It is true though that PAME unionists have played the most important role whether we want to admit it or not".

Even when there is discomfort concerning those external allies who are closely related to the union's organisational leadership (the chairman of the HHU is a member of the Communist party), the great majority of workers welcomes them. The derrick operator

F. argued on who benefitted from the conflict: “both the employer and the union. The employer presses the government by using us; the others that meet us here outside the plant maybe benefit too. I am sure that until the national elections, every party benefits”. The same person admits a few moments later that “most of the steelworkers are neither KKE, nor somebody’s tail. But since someone supports you [...]”.

Nonetheless, a minority of HH employees was consistently voting against the strike and publicly denouncing parties and unions that stood by the strikers with their physical presence inside the plant. Eleni Katsavaki, a firm opponent of the strike argued at the newspaper *To Vima*: “PAME wants to extend the strike until the parliamentary elections as a flag against the austerity measures. However, they cannot fight against the austerity with the flag of HH, which lately wanders around the globe because of them” (Chasapopoulos, 2012b).

The opponents of the HH strike could not easily undermine the status of the union leadership. Apart from the ideological and political ties with actors who provided crucial organisational and symbolic resources to the strikers, the union leadership used a strong means of resonance: the exemplary figure of the Union’s Chairman, Giorgos Sifonios. Worker and member of KKE with 30 years of working experience at HH, the Chairman of the HHU won the respect of friends and foes. His work ethic, honesty and unselfishness, coupled with his militancy, rendered him an exemplary figure and, to a certain extent, charismatic.

The machinist A. and member of the board made the following remark: “he is a fighter, not a unionist [...]: an ordinary man with serious health problems within his family who is omnipresent in order to defend the workers. He works for 30 years in the worst post in the plant and he is the only unionist who does not make use of his legitimate time off. This ethos cannot be easily met”. His work ethos is confirmed by other steelworkers too: “our chairman works at one of the most difficult posts. I can assure you that he is working more than anyone”.

The loyalty of steelworkers to their leaders was reinforced during the strike as the union board dealt with the employer’s practices assuming a participatory leadership style (Fosh, 1993). They were keeping their audience aware of the negotiations, while at the same time they were exposing themselves to employer and state aggressiveness. Trials, injuries from police coercion, even arrests for occupying the workplace were part of the response to the union’s collective actions. Two years after the end of the strike, Sifonios, along with other strikers, was sentenced to 23 months of imprisonment. Outside the courts, Sifonios stated: “They are not convicting us; it is the strike which is convicted [...] the steelworkers will not yield [...] Be sure that the steelworkers will correspond to the tasks that the working class assigned us during the long battle against exploitation” (Sifonios, 2014, p. 11).

To sum up, the personal characteristics of the chairman of the HHU along with certain virtues of the union’s collective leadership cemented the rank-and-file commitment and inspiration – both preconditions for a durable and consistent militant union strategy.

8. Discussion and concluding remarks

The last days of the strike at HH coincided with the protests of Spanish mine workers who went on strike against the government’s decision to cut coal subsidies. Their community’s symbolic resources, combined with the widespread sense of injustice among Spanish people, led to militant repertoires of collective actions (Seymour, 2012), indicating the resurgence of contentiousness, fragments of which appear more and more frequently in the context of the lasting capitalist crisis.

Without overestimating a similarly harsh economic context, the present study focused on the micro dynamics of a long labour struggle carried out by the HHU. The results of the interpretative operation of this discursive field consisted of narrations, framings and slogans, revealed collectivist orientations and felt injustice as necessary conditions for the steelworkers' mobilisation, underpinning Kelly's (1998) argument about their centrality. A universe of socially shared beliefs (van Dijk, 2006) has been made visible as the harsh working conditions that the steelworkers experienced and their sense of belonging to an overexploited, productive avant-garde overlapped with the general feeling of indignation that thousands of workers and unemployed tasted in the context of prolonged austerity. The shift towards an on-going collectivist orientation was reflecting the strikers' desire to protect not merely their interests, but also the interests of social strata who suffer from the economic hardship.

Were those collectivist orientations a mere reflection of the employer's hostility? The same management arrangements within a more or less similar crisis context did not lead to the same mobilisation outcomes. At the HH plant at Volos, the union (HHUV) promoted a persistent moderate strategy, which was sharply contrasted with the HHU practices in the discourse of both local media and the Volos union leadership. During an interview conducted with the HHUV chairman long after the HH strike, the journalist assumed that the employer had imposed contingent work and wage cuts without recognising the "HHUV's support towards the administration when the Aspropyrgos plant was under strike for 8 months" (TRT, 2013). The following argument from the Chairman of HHUV is indicative: "Everyone knows here at Volos that we have backed up the firm during the last two years. We have accepted two waves of wage cuts not to mention contingent work. Now our colleagues are indignant" (TRT, 2013). The anger of steelworkers at Volos was hardly transformed into mobilisation despite the continuous restructuring they suffered. Their moderate leadership was systematically shifting the blame from the employer to the government while denouncing the contentious politics of the HHU. There was neither social identification nor articulation of the workers' sense of injustice that could lead to mobilisation. Some of the HHU strikers claimed that it was the differentiated social position of their colleagues at Volos (both industrial workers and farmers or small traders) that led to this consensus. At the end of the day, the outcomes of the partnership-oriented strategy proved equally poor.

The participatory leadership style (Fosh, 1993) of HHU proved to be a catalyst in transforming the anger and strike proneness into a coherent collective willingness to support the continuation of the strike in the face of its hardships. In line with many scholars of union leadership we found that leadership behaviour can affect rank-and-file commitment (Fosh, 1993; Metochi, 2002; Darlington, 2009a), and this was the case with the HHU leader who chose to "lead by example".

This type of leadership was much easier to appraise in the context we discuss here. We should take into account that, during the crisis, patterns of political cynicism were apparent among the Greek protesters while they were expressing their aloofness to party elites or union bureaucracy. Albeit unique the assault against the chairman of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) during a major protest event in 5 March 2010, it was reported as part of the generalised anger against any institution or individual who represented established bonds with the political system (Megas, 2010).

The emotional response of the steelworkers to their leader involved an emotional reversion of the current trend of denouncing elites (mostly politicians) charged with the

accusation of being either corrupted or completely detached from their electorate or both. Thus, the most critical role of the HHU leadership was the one that concerned framing and identity-building processes which were identified through the qualitative content analysis employed here. This often neglected aspect of strike mobilisations enabled coalition building with other unions, social organisations and activists, constructing what Frege *et al.* (2005, p. 144) call “coalition of protest”. However, this coalition was not strong enough to result in widespread solidarity strike action. The sector is the critical intermediary link between a company union and broader social actors and, as mentioned, the Greek metal sector seemed to be immune to the HHU’s militant calls for solidarity.

This deficiency is grounded on the structure and function of the contemporary Greek labour movement; although a crisis context influences collective behaviour, one should not take for granted that the HHU’s 20 general assemblies, 33 demonstrations and numerous massive events organised by its committees represent the norm within Greek unionism. Many steelworkers admitted that they could not imagine such a collectivist and solidarity outbreak after so many years of individualism and isolation. The breakthrough of the HH strikers is that they managed to imagine themselves as leading actors whose actions are not indifferent to them and others. The HHU reinvented the union’s role as a “sword of justice” (a formulation that Hyman, 2004, p. 18 borrowed from Flanders) and thus occupied a pivotal status in the collective imagination of many Greek people who participated in the protest cycle during 2010 and 2012.

A final and far more difficult task would be to evaluate the impact of the socio-political environment on the HH strike. SM literature provides the critical concept of political opportunities structure as a framework for understanding the environment in which collective actions are inscribed. Without aiming at a “catch-all” interpretative scheme, a future study could assess the rather poor bargaining outcomes of the HH strike through this prism, focusing on the role of the major Greek political parties in the dilution of sectorial unionism well before the outbreak of the economic crisis. From a stricto sensu methodological point of view, our argument is that mobilisation theory could be fruitfully combined with SM theorisations endorsing content analysis techniques in order to operationalise concepts such as felt injustice as determinants of collective action in its inter-subjective and interactional context.

Concluding, the balance of power between the strikers and the HH management would have been different without the particular context of the Greek economic crisis. It is not implied though that a crisis environment automatically produces pro-collectivist attitudes within trade unions. This argument reminds us of Katz’s (2001, p. 341) question to union movement scholars: “if neither sharp economic contradictions nor a sustained economic boom spur SM unionism, what would?”. The HH case indicates that certain collective identities and leadership qualities accumulate high collective mobilisation potential with revitalising spillover effects which are in turn conditioned upon the situation of their social and political allies. However, a further generalisation to the Greek union movement as a whole would require further examination, if it is not to result in wishful thinking.

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About the author

Giorgos Bithymitris holds a PhD in Union Movement Strategies, from the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Department of Social Policy. His current research interests focus on union movement theory, strike events and industrial disputes, organised interests, ideology and framing processes in the context of crisis. He has published academic articles and book chapters on Greek unionism, public discourse in the context of economic crisis, employment relations, etc. He is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Political Research, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences. Giorgos Bithymitris can be contacted at: geobith@kpe-panteion.gr

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