

# **The Greek trade union movement in controversy: against a state-centred approach to labour movement theory**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the most significant arguments regarding the lack of political autonomy among Greek trade unions since their emergence in the early twentieth century. The arguments that are underlined here are those about trade unions' weakness in motivating working people and organizing a massive labour movement. Until now there has been a state centred approach to union studies which underlines the Greek government's admittedly successful strategies to manipulate trade unions. The 'state-centred' analyses have certainly failed to see the movement's fragmentation into two sections: one legal and one illegitimate. More specifically, they have failed to see that labour legislation was combined with laws that restricted political freedom to only those unions which had been subordinate to the state and therefore that it created a group of unions that, once declared illegal, could no longer constitute part of the movement's official representation. In contrast to the state-centred approach, my society-centred approach shifts the focus of analysis from the official and legitimate trade union movement to those organizations that suffered governmental restraints, operating without legal protection. The article argues that the fact that the avant-garde of this section was in the hands of non-Greek nationals made the confrontation of these unions with the Greek state a critical event in the movement's history. In other words, the fact that the autonomous trade union movement was not identified with the nationalist ideology embraced by the Greek state led to the imposition of legal measures against it.

## **KEYWORDS**

Greek trade unions, Autonomy, Government strategies to manipulate trade unions

## *Introduction*

The Greek trade union movement is said to have so far exerted a rather limited influence on the status of the Greek workforce. There are two factors which are held responsible for this situation: the slow and inconsistent way that industrialization took place in the country and the authoritarian approaches of the Greek state to trade unions since they emerged.<sup>1</sup> As an influential scholar of Greek trade unionism pointed out, the Greek trade union movement is more a simulacrum of an institution than an actual labour movement.<sup>2</sup> The reason for this is that, from the very beginning, Greek politicians succeeded in manipulating the trade union cadres by promoting them to leadership positions in political alignment with the government. Most of these cadres had no relation whatsoever with the problems, attitudes and interests of working people, but owed their posts in the high echelons of the trade union hierarchy to their affiliation to the governing party leaders. This paper aims to question these well established arguments by putting emphasis on the circumstances under which the Greek labour movement formed itself and to decipher the reasons why this movement became a state-manipulated bureaucracy.

### *Thessaloniki: the emergence of a great industrial centre in the rural Balkans*

The first trade unions emerged in the late nineteenth century (1870) but their presence had a significant impact on the Greek government's social policy only in the first decades of the twentieth century. More specifically, it was only in 1914 that the first laws regulating the activities of trade unions were enacted. The Liberal party, which was governing at that time, was the first party in power which showed concern for labour movement organization. In 1918, the same government set up the necessary conditions for the creation of the General Confederation of Greek Labour (GSEE). The Confederation, which until now is the supreme hierarchical institution of the Greek labour movement, very soon after 1918 found itself under the Liberal Party's patronage. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the Greek trade union movement succumbed to governmental orders without frictions. Moreover, Greek trade union history is rather contentious because trade union agitation was combined with conflicts related to issues of national sovereignty and problematic assimilation of ethnic minorities.

The reason why I put forward the issue of national homogeneity is that in the 1900s, when the first militant trade unions emerged, the Greek national territory did not include many areas which were important for the trade union movement. Macedonia and Thrace, for example, only became Greek after two bloody wars between Greece, its Northern neighbour Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire. Thessaloniki, the large

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<sup>1</sup> Mouzelis, N. P. *Politics in the Semi-Periphery*, London: MacMillan, 1986, pp.74-75.

<sup>2</sup> Koukoules, G. 'Hoi Syllogikes Diapragmateuseis stin Hellada, [Collective Bargaining in Greece]' in *Syndicalistiki Epiteorisi*, March, no.3, p.20, 1985.

Macedonian capital and a significant industrial centre in the era, became Greek only in 1912.<sup>3</sup> Thessaloniki was a multicultural and multi-ethnic city: Greeks, Jews, Turks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Rom and many others had co-existed for centuries. If the city's nationality were to be determined by that ethnic group which constituted the majority of the population, then it should be defined as a Jewish city and not a Greek one, since Jews and not Greeks were the majority. More importantly, Jews were significant for the city's economy not only as capitalists, but also as workers manning the most developed industries in the city. The latter abounded to such an extent, that one could very well argue that Thessaloniki had been the biggest industrial centre in the Ottoman World before 1912, and had a technological infrastructure much more robust than Athens in the years that followed the city's acquisition by the Greek army. Under no circumstances, however, does this mean that Greeks did not play an important role in the city's economy as workers. However, there were industries such as tobacco handling and processing in which Jews constituted the overwhelming majority.<sup>4</sup>

It would not be wrong to say that the tobacco workers of Thessaloniki were a privileged group within the Macedonian working class, since their salaries were considerably higher than those earned by their peers in other Macedonian cities. Moreover, tobacco workers had a particularly positive identity of themselves which was exceptional compared to the Greek working class.<sup>5</sup> This identity was combined with socialist ideology which was particularly influential amongst Jewish workers.

### ***The Jewish Federation***

In fact, the most prominent socialist organization both in Macedonia and later on in the entire Greek territory was the *Federacion* which was founded in 1909. It was not

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Quataert wrote: "The industrial infrastructure of Thessalonica – including both factories and workshops – was probably the greatest in the Ottoman world....The newly founded establishments included: a distillery, six soap factories, a brick factory, another making nails ....a factory making bedsteads, four workshops producing handmade chairs , three macaroni factories and ten flour mills, as well as two cotton spinning mills." Quataert D. The workers of Thessalonica, 1850-1912". In: Quataert D. and Zürcher E. (eds.) *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. 1839-1950*. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1995, pp.62-63.

<sup>4</sup> "...Thessalonica supplied about one-fifth of the tobacco processed and contained one of the most important cigarette-making factories in the empire. In 1883, at Thessalonica, the factory of the tobacco monopoly was producing 100.000 machine-made cigarettes daily; thereafter, its annual cigarette output grew steadily" (Ibid. p.66)...."Tobacco handling and processing was easily the largest single employer at Thessalonica. Some 4.000-5.000 persons ( as compared to at least 15.000 workers in the Kavalla district and another 5.000 in the Xanthi district sorted and packaged tobacco...Mostly men worked at some districts, such as Xanthi while at Kavalla tobacco manipulators were almost evenly divided by gender. In the Thessalonica, sorting shops, however, women were the overwhelming majority. Besides the sorters and packagers, there were the cigarette makers of the tobacco monopoly factory...mostly Jewish. In 1891 there were 15 foremen supervising 300 such workers, two-thirds of them were female and 270 were Jewish....Altogether there were 335 workers, 90 per cent of them Jewish." ( Ibid. p .71).

<sup>5</sup> A. Elefantis wrote for the Greek workers in 1920's: "...with the exception of craft workers, a worker's job is a dishonourable occupation, and the person who follows it is equally dishonourable, an outcast without self-respect, disapproved by petty-bourgeois decency, inept, a manual labourer and wage earner, and therefore brutal and insecure". Elefantis, A. *He Apaggelia tis Adinatis Epanastasis*. (The Promise of Impossible Revolution) in Athens Olkos, 1976, p.321.

only controlled by tobacco workers, but also by the Jewish socialist intelligentsia, that is, a group consisting of distinguished figures committed to the promotion of Jewish workers' solidarity. Greeks or other ethnic groups did not participate in its ranks preferring to organize their own national organizations. It should be noted here, that before the Greek incorporation of Thessaloniki, the city's population was divided into conflicting national organizations. Greeks, Bulgarians and Turks were seeking the acquisition of Macedonia by their respective nation states. Only the Jews did not have a nation state to fall back on. However, they thought of Thessaloniki as their own city. Thus, it is not surprising that the day after 26 October 1912 when the Greek army entered the city, many Jews regarded this as an occupation of the city by foreigners.<sup>6</sup> Although the leaders of the *Federacion* later played an active role in the Greek workers' movement, and their capacity as the leaders of labour organization in the country was eventually acknowledged by the Greeks, in their early brochures, they combined working-class ideals with particular national hints. Abraham Benaroya, the most prominent *Federacion* leader, compared the working class of Thessaloniki to its counterparts in Athens and Piraeus, arguing favourably on behalf of his city peers:

Those who are in charge of the centres and the unions in Athens are characterized by ambitions that are alien to the needs of the growing working masses. The labour centres of Thessaloniki constitute something of an exception. Fewer in number and more centralized, they emerged later and were more influenced by the mass expressions of socialist activities.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Benaroya presented the *Federacion* as an alternative model to the majority of Greek labour organizations. It was a militant and well-structured organization with a concise programme able to motivate the working masses. In fact the *Federacion* managed to represent Greek labour both in the first Conference of the Greek Labour Confederation and was the main organization in the establishment of the Greek Socialist Labour Party (SEKE) in 1918. They were also proposed by the Greek Prime Minister El. Venizelos to represent Greece in the 1918 European Socialist Conference in London.<sup>8</sup> The *Federacion* however, was still imbued with distinctively anti-nationalist views, which could be easily considered by Greeks as anti-Hellenic.<sup>9</sup> In 1918, with new elections

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Haupt G. Introduction to the History of La Fédération. In: Benaroya, A. *He Proti stadiodromia tou Hellinikou proletariatou* (The First Steps of the Greek Proletariat). Athens: Stochastis, 1986, p.33.

<sup>7</sup> Benaroya A. *He Proti stadiodromia tou Hellinikou proletariatou* (The First Steps of the Greek Proletariat). Athens: Stochastis, 1986, p.112.

<sup>8</sup> Benaroya accepted, on condition that the Prime Minister, in return, agree to stop his persecution of Socialists and allow a labour conference to be held in Greece. See Koumandaraki, Anna. *Identity in the Semi-Periphery: The case of the Greek Trade Union Movement*. PhD Thesis University of Essex. 1996, p.89.

<sup>9</sup> Both the El. Venizelos Government and some socialist comrades of Benaroya did not hesitate to openly express their hostility to him and his organization. According to Nicos Yannios, leader of the Socialist Centre of Athens, Benaroya was not a suitable representative of Greek socialism. He particularly criticised the Fédération for promoting the idea of a Balkan Federation which was a concept entirely incompatible with Greek national irredentism and the recent victories of the Greek army in Macedonia and Thrace. This hostile attitude against Jews was no monopoly of the Greek government and Yannios. Giannis Kordatos, for instance, who later became general secretary of the Greek Communist Party, did

imminent, Venizelos, in an attempt to re-establish some connection with the community, deemed the socialist leader Benaroya a suitable intermediary. Venizelos did not really desire an autonomous organization of the working class, but realized that working-class living standards were so poor, that the labour problem had to be dealt with somehow, especially at a time when socialism was gaining ground and had established considerable influence among working people. Venizelos intended to put an end to this, but, for the moment, he also needed the European socialists' good will to pursue his nationalist and military aspirations. Consequently, the *Federacion* succeeded in prevailing in Greek trade union politics and in taking positions on the Greek Turkish war of 1919-1922 which were against the government irredentist strategy. Under Benaroya's influence, the SEKE decided that the Balkan Socialist Parties should fight all imperialist claims of their national governments and declared that the only way to bring about the union of the Balkan peoples and lasting peace and understanding, was the creation of a Balkan Democratic Federation, "founded on genuine democratic principles, guaranteeing full and true political, ethnic and linguistic freedom, regardless of race and religion".<sup>10</sup> This proposal for a Balkan Democratic Federation, which was close to Benaroya's heart too, however moderately it was put forward by the party, indelibly marked the destiny of SEKE. Whilst the party became the principal pro-peace political organization in those years, during the strike wave of 1919 -1920 many socialists all over the country were either imprisoned or deported to remote islands. Some of them were forcefully inducted into the army, where they attempted to disseminate socialist principles, and induced their fellow soldiers to take an active anti-war stand. It was in the army that many Greek soldiers first heard about the Russian Revolution and became communists. Meanwhile, the situation at the front deteriorated rapidly for the Greek side. The government's decision to continue the war until the Greeks in Asia Minor had been freed from Turkish sway, led to the defeat of Greece and the influx of 1,200,000 refugees into Greece. This was not without an impact on SEKE too. First of all, the ethnic composition of the country's Northern provinces changed radically: the flood of refugees made Greeks an overwhelming majority, especially since, at the same time, Muslims were forced to leave. The Jews lost much of their economic superiority and were confined to a few districts in Thessaloniki. Moreover, for the established landowners of Macedonia, the refugees' arrival meant the break-up of their estates, which the government distributed as part of a resettlement programme. The Greeks' prevalence in Macedonia militated against the federalist principles SEKE was advocating. Furthermore, the soldiers returning from the war had in the meantime acquired a radicalism that challenged the SEKE leadership. The latter, a few months before the Asia Minor disaster (in the congress of February 1922), had decided in favour of the principle of 'peaceful co-existence' with the bourgeois

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his utmost to prove that the influence of *Fédération* was limited to Thessalonica. According to him the spread of socialist ideas in Macedonia was due to efforts of mainly Bulgarian and Greek socialists. Whilst Kordatos tried to show that the ethnic cleavages were insignificant in the formation of the Greek trade union movement, his criticism of Benaroya illustrates his own pro-national dispositions. Koumandaraki, *Ibid.*, p.94.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Leon, G.B. *The Greek Socialist Movement in the First World War*. New York: East European Quarterly, Columbia University Press, 1976, p.115.

regime. For this very decision, they were attacked by the returning soldiers as political reformists, and expelled from the party ranks (Benaroya was amongst those expelled).

### ***The Greek Communist party position on Macedonia and its effects on left-wing trade union identity***

In 1920 the SEKE changed its name to the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), and in 1924 it officially embraced the principles stipulated by the Communist International. The new party line on the national question was slightly different from that of its predecessor. In 1925, after the COMINTERN (under the insistence of Bulgarian communists) spoke up for an independent Macedonia, the KKE incorporated this goal into its own programme. The Comintern's decision to support the national independence of Macedonia was connected with the favourable prospects of the Bulgarian communists igniting a socialist revolution in the Balkans. It demanded international recognition of the need for an independent Macedonian state, an attitude which implied the existence of a nationally homogeneous Macedonian population seeking autonomy.

The Communists' definition of nation referred to an historically formed community of people who are bound together by a common language, inhabit a common area, share an economic life and have a common national character expressed in a common culture. Every national group thus conceived, should, according to communist theorists, enjoy the right of "self determination". In Lenin's words, this right may be employed "up to the point of separation" of the national group from the state in which it lives. Lenin outlined a theory of nationality for the purpose of combating nationalism itself, aiming to direct the masses' attention against the bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> He argued that there are no nations more important than others. All nations are equal and may legitimately exercise the right of self-determination. What he meant is that where "historical" nations have occupied the territory of other nations, the communist comrades should back the struggle of oppressed nations for self-determination up to the point of separation. In the context of Greece, the communists' duty would be the fight for the emancipation of the Macedonian people and the subsequent separation of Macedonian land from Greece. On national issues, Lenin observed, workers and capitalists tend to form a united front against an alien national element in the state in which they live, or against a neighbouring nation which oppresses a kin minority. Instead of doing this, the

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<sup>11</sup> Based on Lenin, V.I. "He Sosialistiki Epanastasi kai to Dikaioma Autodiathesis ton Ethnon [Socialist Revolution and Nations' right for Self Determination]". In: Lenin, V.I. *Kritika Simiomata pano sto Ethniko Zitima. Gia to Dikaioma Autodiathesis ton Ethnon*. [Critical Notes on the National Question. On the Right of Nations for Self-Determination]. Athens: Sychroni Epochi, 2006, pp.106 -122. Detailed descriptions of Lenin's theses on the national question are also cited in Fischer, Ernst/Marek, Franz. *O Lenin me ta dika tou logia* [Lenin in his own words]. Athens: Heridanos, 1973, pp.56 – 66, Lowy, Michael. *To Ethniko Zititma apo to Marx mexri Simera* [The National Question from Marx up to now]. Athens: Stachi, 1993, pp. 70-76, Vasilis, Liosis. *Imperialismos kai Exartisi. He Proseggisi tou Lenin. H Periptosi tis Elladas kai Kritiki*. [Imperialism and Dependence. Lenin's Approach. The Case of Greece]. Athens, pp.50-52, 2012.

proletariat, according to Lenin, should oppose its own bourgeoisie and sustain the right of national minorities within its own state to national independence.<sup>12</sup>

In 1924 when the Greek Socialist Party was transformed into the Communist Party of Greece, Stalin, who had risen to the leading position in the Soviet Union and the Comintern, followed Lenin's policy on national questions to its extremes. The Soviet government considered Macedonia to be the place where the socialist revolution in the Balkans could be successful. Hence, they supported the plans of the Bulgarian nationalist organization EMEO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization –VMRO in Bulgarian) for the emancipation from Greece of a separate Macedonian state identified with Bulgarian national interests. According to this line, the Greek communists should also fight for Macedonian national self-determination against the imperialistic Greek bourgeoisie. The Greek Communist leaders did not have the power to defend Greek national interests in the Comintern since the old socialist cadres who could defend them had lost the party leadership and the young cadres who replaced them were not realistic enough to confront the Comintern anti-Greek attitudes. However, later the Greek communist leaders changed their mind and did their best to influence the Comintern against the slogan of a Macedonian nation separate from Greece. Pandelis Pouliopoulos and Nicolaos Zachariadis, who was imposed as the leader of the Greek communist party by the Comintern, tried to persuade the leading international communist organization about the negative consequences of such position on the Greek Left.<sup>13</sup>

This attitude was certainly more radical than the position of the SEKE, which had sought a Balkan Federation recognizing a variety of ethnic minorities living in Macedonia. Yet, as noted above, this more radical stance presumed that the Macedonian people were a separate nation seeking its independence and did not at all consider the ethnic diversity among these people. Thus, paradoxically, the position of the new party was ethnocentric even though it was advocating the rights of a nation fighting against Greek national interests. The new policy calling for an independent Macedonia implied a homogeneous Macedonian and Thracian majority population in these regions, Greek sovereignty notwithstanding. Whilst the SEKE programme had sought the autonomy of ethnic groups and the protection of their rights under the umbrella of a multinational federation, the new programme did not rule out the possibility of setting up a new sovereign nation-state. The KKE's acceptance of such a prospect constituted a significant change from the ideology that the SEKE had supported, which might in all probability, signify a more general attempt of the party to become institutionally stronger. Another

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<sup>12</sup> Based on Kofos E. *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*. Thessalonica: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1964, p.67.

<sup>13</sup> Alekos Papapanagiotou has shown in detail the alterations in the policy of the Greek Communist Party on the Macedonian question. Papapanagiotou, Alexos. *To Makedoniko Zitima kai to Balkaniko Kommounistikiko Kinima 1918 -1939* [The Macedonian Question and the Balkan Communist Movement 1918-1939]. Athens Themelio, 1992, pp.86 -109. Papanagiotou argued that the Comintern's position on the Macedonian question and the subsequent agreement of the Balkan Communist parties with it had detrimental effects on the Balkan Communist Movement not only in Greece and Serbia, but also in Bulgaria where the Communist Party had fully accepted the EMEO nationalist position on Macedonia (Ibid., p.124).

symptom of this was the creation of separate 'red' trade unions in 1927, after the communists had left the United General Confederation of Greek Labour (GSEE) and created their own union confederation.

According to Kofos, the KKE position on Macedonia and Thrace reflects the party leadership's ignorance of the true situation in Northern Greece.<sup>14</sup> Agelos Elefantis argued that not only was that position mistaken and harmful to the party in the long run, but it also was a position that the Greek communists accepted with great reluctance, and only after they had been virtually ordered to do so by the Communist International. In addition, it occurred at a time when the party started dissenting from its socialist origins.<sup>15</sup> With the KKE still under the influence of Benaroya and other socialists, the 'long lawful existence' of the party proclaimed in 1922 in the context of the bourgeois regime was dismissed in 1924 as reformist by the new communist leadership elected in the meantime. Furthermore, according to Elefantis, the elimination of the old socialist leadership deprived the Communist Party of experienced members whose political reformism was counterbalanced by the great appeal which they enjoyed amongst the working people.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, the new leaders were more radical, and whilst committed to socialist principles, lacked the political skills to provide the KKE with substantial popular support. To George Mavrogordatos' mind, the KKE's position on Macedonia deprived the party of the vote of the people who might otherwise have become its popular base.<sup>17</sup> These were the refugees from Asia Minor, many of whom were frightened off by the party's position. Even though they had been the worst-hit victims of the Irredentist War, they held the conviction that it had been fought principally for their liberation. Resettling the majority of them in Macedonia and Thrace had made it possible for the Greek government to claim that Greeks were the dominant ethnic group in the region. The communists' demand for an ethnic Macedonian state, apart from being anti-national, deliberately ignored the actual situation in Macedonia.

### ***The Class Identity of Native Macedonians and Refugees from Asia Minor***

As the KKE's inherited political affinities lay with the old inhabitants of Macedonia, the interest they took in the refugees was superficial. This was in keeping with the party's anti-nationalist, anti-war principles. Its stance in relation to the Macedonians can be seen as an attempt to protect the rights of ethnic minorities in the Balkans, which were endangered by efforts to divide the region into different nation

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<sup>14</sup> Kofos has written that the failure of KKE to attract the masses through its slogan for a 'united and independent Macedonia and Thrace' should be mainly attributed to the fact that the people to whom this slogan was directed simply did not exist. According to the statistics of the League of Nations, the ethnic composition of Greek Macedonia in this period was: Greeks 1,341,000 (88%), Muslims 2,000 (0.1%), Bulgarians 77,000 (5.1 %), Various 91,000 (6.0%), Total Population: 1, 511, 000. Kofos, E. *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*. Thessalonica: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1964, p.83.

<sup>15</sup> Elefantis, *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Mavrogordatos, G. *The Stillborn Republic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

states. During World War I and the Greek-Turkish war which followed, the SEKE was the leading campaigner for peace inside Greek borders. As Mavrogordatos quotes:

The satisfactory settlement of the refugees, and in particular their access to real property, whether rural or urban, was thus conceived as the most effective strategy for making them immune to leftist agitation. Full ownership of one's house or agricultural land was supposed to firmly establish a fundamentally 'bourgeois' identity, taken in its broadest sense. Placed in this perspective, the settlement of the refugees and their establishment as property owners have been widely hailed as an achievement which left no ground for the Communist Party.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Greek Communists were thought to abide by the orders of the Comintern on the issue of Macedonia, Slavo-Macedonians provided the ground for the Greek Communist party to develop an antinationalist and, to the eyes of the Greek government, anti-Hellenic strategy on the issue. Although since 1922 Macedonia had become ethnically Greek, one should not forget there was still a compact Slavo-Macedonian minority which had considerable linguistic and socioeconomic differences from the overwhelming Greek majority. These people had felt that their rights and interests in the region were seriously threatened due to the Greek government's decision to settle Asia Minor refugees in the most productive arable lands of the Macedonian peninsula. In addition, Greek state, after 1936 when the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas had been imposed, forbid Slavophones to speak their own language in public and to organize festivals wherein their own language was cherished. In other words the Greek state treated the Slavophones as an ethnic minority within their own territory which potentially threatened Greek national sovereignty in the Northern provinces. The Slavophones' difficult situation did not leave the Communist Party activists indifferent; they took for granted that the language of the particular minority identified with that of the native Macedonian population. In their line of thought, the refugees from Asia Minor were seen as the enemy who jeopardised the interests of the natives regarding the fertile Macedonian lands.<sup>19</sup>

The conflict between the native people of Macedonia and refugees from Asia Minor had a class dimension: whilst the natives belonged to the peasantry and the working class, the refugees, thanks to the government's decision to distribute lands to them, became small landowners who tried their best to avoid proletarianization. The ethnic diversification between the two groups was thus combined with a conflict of their class interests. Moreover, as mentioned above, the avant-garde of the Greek working class were

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.215.

<sup>19</sup> As Iakovos Michailidis has argued, "the main cause of the conflict between Slavophones and Refugees which continued to be even more powerful in the next two decades was connected with solely financial issues and more specifically with the question of distribution of the lands which before their liberation by Greeks were propertied by Muslim landowners. The conflict between Slavophones and refugees over lands was, according to Michailidis "the superior social conflict in interwar Greek". Michailidis I. "Slavophonoi kai Prosfiges: Politikes Sinistoses Mias Oikonomikis Diamaxis [Slavophones and Refugees: Political Aspects of a Financial Confrontation]" in Veremis, T. *Tautotites sti Makedonia* [Identities in Macedonia].Athens: Papazissis, 1997, p.123.

the tobacco workers who played the leading role in all mobilizations of the Greek labour movement in the interwar period. The combination of class agitation with ethnic differences bitterly divided the Greek trade union movement into those trade unions which were attached to the state and an unofficial fraction, which, due to its anti-national ideology, became inadmissible by the Government as an official representative of the Greek working people. Moreover, since the left-wing trade union movement was condemned by Greek law as a Communist party mechanism, it was not only considered to be a threat to national integrity, but was also expunged from official texts and governmental documents. The communist unions' expulsion influenced the bibliography on Greek trade union movement: for Anthonis Liakos, Theodoros Katsanevas and George Mavrogordatos,<sup>20</sup> the trade unions which were worth mentioning were the unions which were affiliated to the political parties of the government and its parliamentary opposition. According to this line of argument, the trade unions which were affiliated to the Greek Communist Party lacked considerable influence on working people due to the option of the Communist party to support the separation of Macedonia from Greece, losing ground among working people who accused it of committing treason. Therefore, Communist Party influence in the working class was practically eliminated. Having said that however, scholars of the Greek trade union movement failed to see that the Communist Party programme was particularly appealing to those sections of the Greek working class who, for reasons related to the Greek government's strategy against different ethnic groups, could not identify with the anti-communist and pro-national policy that these governments advocated. Mouzelis, for instance, regarded confrontations as an insignificant parameter of the Greek social formation as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Yet as Serapheim Seferiadis has shown, even in the countries of the semi-periphery like Greece, the labour movement was developed.<sup>22</sup> As the author wrote, the uneven and slow pace of industrialization did not restrain Greek working people in regard to the creation of trade unions in the inter-war era. Perhaps these unions did not have the robust organizations that their counterparts had in the countries where industrialization was the focal point of economic growth, but even under the conditions of retarded industrial development, trade unions emerged. This happened, as Seferiadis explained, because working-class organizations are primarily political organizations which reflect the way that working people experience their class identity.<sup>23</sup> The way that this identity is experienced varies amongst the different societies. Hence, even in the semi-periphery there are particular

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<sup>20</sup> Liakos, A. *Ergasia ke Politiki stin Ellada tou Mesopolemou*, [Employment and Politics in Inter-War Greece], Athens: Idrima Ergasias ke Pedias tis Emporikis Trapezas, 1993; Katsanevas, T. *Trade unions in Greece*, Athens: National Centre of Social Research, 1984; Mavrogordatos, G. *Metaxi Pitiokampti ke Procrusti: Hoi epaggelmatikes organoseis sti simerini Hellada*, [Between Pitiokamptis and Procrustis: Professional Associations in Contemporary Greece] Athens: Odysseas, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Mouzelis, N. P (1986) *Politics in the Semi-Periphery*, London: MacMillan, 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Seferiadis, S. *Gia tin sygrotisi tis ergatikis taxis stin Ellada (1870-1936)* [The Constitution of the Greek Working Class (1877 -1936)]. *Elliniki Epitheorisi Politikis Epistimis*, tefxos 6, n.11, pp. 9-78, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p.13. Seferiadis' argument is informed by E.P. Thompson's famous quotation: "Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and in the end, this is its only definition". Thompson, E.P. *The making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin, 1963, p.10.

productive sectors where the labour movement is particularly strong. This was the case of tobacco workers in Northern Greece.

### ***The tobacco workers' role in the Greek labour movement***

Tobacco workers have been considered to be an exceptional case within the Greek working class. Authors like R. V. Burks and more recently, Mark Mazower, have emphasized tobacco workers' differences from the rest of the working class. In Burks' words:

The tobacco workers' union is among the oldest and most stoutly organized in Greece; in matters of seniority, the tobacco worker is among the best protected labourers in Greece. Furthermore, his work is counted as highly skilled and is among the best paid. The women, dressed in neatly pressed and brightly coloured cotton prints, are reputed to be the best-dressed among lower class Greek women. On pay day, fruit peddlers and other hawkers can be seen hovering near the doors of the warehouses, doing a brisk trade in oranges and other fruits, much too expensive for the purse of the average Greek worker.

On the other hand, employment among tobacco workers is highly seasonal. Much depends on the state of the world market and its ability to absorb Greek (that is Turkish) tobacco. A tobacco manipulator may be employed only six months in the year. During unemployment he must fall back on a meagre government dole. He alternates between more than average prosperity and hungry impecuniousness.<sup>24</sup>

And in Mazower's words:

Tobacco workers formed one of the most militant sections of the Greek labour force. Several factors lay behind the tobacco workers' tradition of organized radicalism: the urban refugees' lack of ties to the land, and the working environment itself, where several hundred employees worked alongside one another in one of those cavernous warehouses which still impress the visitor of Kavala or Xanthi. In a country where most of the work-force was slow to develop a sense of collective action, the achievements of the Tobacco Federation of Greece were startling.<sup>25</sup>

Arguing about the exceptional class consciousness and political participation of Macedonia's tobacco workers, one should not forget that Macedonia and particularly Thessaloniki was, in the interwar era, a city of high agitation and confrontation on the part of the working class.<sup>26</sup> The influence of the Communist Party, and furthermore that

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<sup>24</sup> Burks, R.V. *The dynamics of Communism on Eastern Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, pp.55-56.

<sup>25</sup> Mazower, M. *Greece and the Inter-War Economic Crisis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p.126.

<sup>26</sup> See Daggas, A. *O Chafies*. [The Informer] Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 1995, pp.69-106. Also Moskoph, Op.Cit. Indeed Moskoph has argued that the sad end (ten deaths and Metaxas' imposition of dictatorship) of the 1936 tobacco workers' strike demonstrations was due to the social-democratic

of the old socialist cadres, on Thessaloniki's working-class activists was particularly strong.<sup>27</sup> Therefore one could argue that the trade union movement in the Northern Greek provinces did not follow the dominant model of a state manipulated trade union bureaucracy but instead, it expressed a militancy that questions the well-established argument of the Greek trade union movement's weakness and docility towards the state. The existence of a strong left-wing trade union movement was also responsible for the anti-communist legislation that was enacted in Greece in 1929 (the *Idionimon* law). The law was enacted by the Venizelos' government and clearly stipulated the imprisonment of those who "attempt to implement ideas obviously aimed at overthrowing the established social regime by the use of violence or by detaching the [national] territory". It is not surprising that *Idionimon* also prohibited ideas aimed at the overthrow of the social system and the prosecution of suggestions favourable to local autonomy, which obviously referred to left wing party positions on an independent Macedonia and Thrace. Thus the government under the pretext of vexed national interest by KKE cadres took measures aiming to penalize autonomous trade unions. According to official statistics for the years 1929-1937, more than 60 per cent of the people condemned for crimes against state security or for infringements of *Idionimon*, belonged to the working class. In the same period, 96.4 per cent of the people prosecuted for having threatened national security, were penalized on the grounds of *Idionimon*, and only 3.6 per cent on the grounds of other laws.<sup>28</sup> After the imposition of Metaxas' dictatorship, *Idionimon* was replaced by even harsher legislation, where the penalization of communist ideology was mainly based on its alleged anti-patriotic attitude. The militant trade unions were certainly prosecuted on the grounds of anti-communists' protection of the national integrity of Greece. More important, the economic policy that was implemented in the inter-war years tried to diminish the number of working people who belonged to the working class and to promote instead the affluence of the small enterprise managers who owned very small and family-run units with very few employees.<sup>29</sup> This situation was certainly against the

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(rather than communist) ideology of the organizers. It seems to me, however, that his criticism of the limited success of the Thessalonica communist organization stems from his disagreement with the social-democratic and Trotskyist ideas of the Thessalonian party leaders. However inept the handling of the May 1936 events, the fact remains that the communist organization in Thessalonica was the largest party organization at that time. According to Moskoph's own figures (derived from oral testimony), when the SEKE was founded in 1918, Thessalonica alone accounted for 60 per cent of the 1000 party members. This included the whole of the *Federacion*. The party organizations of Athens and Piraeus had 150 and 100 members respectively. The SEKE crisis in 1924, caused by the split between its social-democrats and hard liners, reduced the membership to 600. The most serious decline in the strength of the KKE in Thessaloniki was in 1933, when the party lost 30 per cent of its members in the city but, according to Moskoph, increased its membership by 500 per cent in the province of Macedonia! (See Moskoph, *Ibid.*, p.459) cited also in Koumandaraki, A. *Identity in the Semi-Periphery: The case of the Greek Trade Union Movement*. PhD thesis. University of Essex, 1996, pp. 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> Popular support for the KKE remained steady in Thessalonica and much above the national level during all of the inter-war period. Whilst the party polled only 4.3 per cent in the national elections in 1932 and 1933, the Thessaloniki vote remained a steady 20 per cent throughout. Of the Jewish vote, with a quarter of the city's total, 15 per cent, went to the KKE. Moskoph, K. *Op.Cit.* pp. 456-457.

<sup>28</sup> Alivizatos, N. *Hoi Politikoi thesmoi se krissi (1922-1974): Opseis tis hellinikis empirias*, [Political Institutions in crisis (1922-1974): Aspects of the Greek experience], Athens: Themelio, 1986. p.359.

<sup>29</sup> The extent to which Greek enterprises managed to avoid their proletarianization by setting up their own family run productive units is questionable though. As Serapheim Seferiadis has shown, many of these

empowerment and the unity of the labour movement. Therefore, the weak trade union movement which was seen as the main characteristic of Greek workers' movement did not emerge "naturally" through inconsistent and limited industrialization only; it was also the outcome of a programmed state strategy against trade union agitation.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The aim of this article was to find out whether a strong labour movement was feasible in Greece. As certain scholars of the Greek labour movement have argued, Greek trade unions from the very beginning of their organization became politically dependent on the Greek state and consequently lost their opportunity to express themselves in a subversive way. The article attempted to figure out the reasons why the trade unions' manipulation by the governing political parties occurred, and to prove that this is to a great extent due to the Greek Communist Party's position for an independent Macedonia and Thrace. In other words, the main argument is that those unions that followed a strategy against the Greek government's policy on labour, soon found themselves involved in a struggle committed to minority rights. Consequently, given the Greek state's pro-nationalist profile, they were persecuted as dangerous to their country's national sovereignty. Last but not least, I would like to argue that the study of the history of the Greek trade union movement needs a more detailed, thorough and systematic approach, in which the detailed research of particular sectors and historical moments is emphasized. In my view, only in this way will we be able to know the extent to which working people were affected and mobilised by left-wing political agitation and were able to overcome their political passivity, which I hope is made clear in this work.

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entrepreneurs suffered from equal degree of poverty like many working people. In fact, in certain cases their situation was even worse since a great number amongst them were people who were unable to find a permanent job and were wandering around with all their family setting up temporary workshops close to or inside their houses (Seferiadis, Op.Cit, pp.30-32). Moreover, he argued that although in numbers the Greek working class did not include the masses that the British or French working class included, it was still represented by a militant trade union avant-garde which was nevertheless a marginal social phenomenon. However, this marginal political organization proves that the process of constituting the working class has started during the inter-war era whilst in the year 1936 class struggle was an explosive phenomenon all over the country, (Seferiadis, Op.Cit., pp. 9-78).

<sup>30</sup> Koumandaraki, A. Op. Cit. pp. 138-141.