

# **Between steel and fire: The 2011-12 nine-month-long strike of the metalworkers at Hellenic Steel**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In October 2011 Greece was in the midst of an economic crisis. The first austerity measures had already been adopted and the International Monetary Fund and the Greek government were planning further burdens to the economic and social life of the people as a means to overcome the bad situation for the Greek economy. These changes were actually overturning basic labour rights which had been gained for the employees as a result of the trades unions' struggles and the political decisions of the previous decades, especially during the 1970s and the 1980s. Redundancies, wage reductions, streamlining of labour relations against the workers were common strategic solutions for the employers during the years of economic crisis. All these were accompanied with provocative and cynical blackmail towards employees to accept the changes in order to retain their jobs. In this framework, the same dilemmas were posed in the metal factory Hellenic Steel in Aspropyrgos. From 31<sup>st</sup> October, a massive strike had started in the factory. Lasting nine months (273 days), it was the longest strike in the history of modern Greece and probably one of the longest generally in the history of the working-class movement. Here, I examine the strike, the tactics of both employers and employees and its impact. Through these questions, other aspects will emerge, such as the development of class solidarity by other workers to the strike, the evolution of the workers' demands, the fatigue of the long-term struggle, the role of the other trades unions. Finally, the influence of the strike over the workers and the trades unions nowadays.

## **KEYWORDS**

Strike, Metalworkers, Steelworkers, Working class, Greece, Economic crisis, Hellenic Steel, PAME, GSEE, Aspropyrgos, Labour movement, Unions, Greek industry, Scabs, Metallurgical factory, Steel industry

# I ntroduction

The 9-month-long strike of Hellenic Steel was the longest strike in the modern history of Greece. It was an attempt of the workers in one of the largest steel factories in the country to protect their labour rights during the period of the capitalist economic crisis that began in 2011.

The steel industry in Greece started to develop after WWII. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by an increase in workers' trade union organization in the steel factories as well as very rough struggles against the employers, several of which ended victorious for the workers. From the mid-1980s however workers' participation in the unions' collective processes decreased. This was a general phenomenon in the Greek labour movement following the Social Democratic Party's (PASOK) rise to power. This was due, partly to the labour and welfare legislation adopted by the new government, as well as its wider effort to incorporate and control the trades unions through various means.

In 2006, the factory of Hellenic Steel in Aspropyrgos, outside Athens, was taken over by a new owner, the industrialist Manesis, who also owned another steel factory in Central Greece, in Volos.<sup>1</sup> In the period before the strike, Hellenic Steel was the largest supplier of major Greek public infrastructure works and a major supplier of the private construction sector not only in Greece but also abroad, especially in the Balkan market.<sup>2</sup>

The company's production increased year after year and overtime work in the industry was multiplied, while workers' wages for overtime work were reduced by law.<sup>3</sup> Characteristic of the labour intensity was the fact that from the 1990s to 2010 labour productivity doubled (from 4 to 8 foundries per shift) without any maintenance or renewal of the machinery, the material equipment and the facilities.<sup>4</sup> As workers had pointed out, the machines were working non-stop and breakdowns were frequent.<sup>5</sup> That situation led to the death of two workers in the factories of Volos and Aspropyrgos, both due to improper maintenance of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hlv.gr/index.php/el/company/history/> .

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hlv.gr/index.php/el/company/projects/>; *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, Athens: ΝΟ Βιομηχανίας της ΚΟΑ, 2012, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, Athens: Διεθνές Βήμα 2020, pp. 57-59, 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 34-36, 67.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 33-41, 57-60; Statement of the Administrative Council of the Hellenic Steel's trade-union «*Η ΕΝΟΤΗΤΑ*», Aspropyrgos: 21/11/11.

the machines.<sup>6</sup> These incidents led the workers of the Aspropyrgos factory to improve their bonds with their trade union and taking action.

Workers' participation in the union assemblies increased from 30-40 people to 150-200 people (out of a total of 350 employees).<sup>7</sup> The factory's union Administrative Workers' Council had a great part in this. The majority of the council members were affiliated to the ESAK faction, a faction supported by PAME, a trades unions' front, where the members of the Communist Party (KKE) participated. These council members had been long warning and preparing the employees for the attack that they were about to face by the company. Hence, before the strike, a dynamic core of workers had already been formed around the trade union leadership. The president of the union was a member of the KKE.

### **The strike**

In the first half of 2011, the year of the strike, Greek workers were already experiencing the severe consequences of the financial crisis that broke out in 2008. However, according to steel workers' testimonies, the company had major orders from Algeria and Israel.<sup>8</sup> Despite that, on the 17<sup>th</sup> October the factory owner called the union's Administrative Council and announced that "due to the difficult financial situation", as he characteristically said, he had to reduce working hours from 8 to 5 as well as cut wages by 40%.<sup>9</sup> The employer also made clear that this decision had already been taken, that those measures had already been imposed in the Volos factory and that any employees' disagreement would lead to 180 dismissals as of November 1st.<sup>10</sup> The Administrative Council rejected the ultimatum and decided to bring the employer's proposal before a General Assembly so that the workers would decide. The General Assembly, attended by almost 300 employees (out of 350), decided to reject the employer's proposal and called

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<sup>6</sup> Bulletin of EKE-ΔΑ Trade Union Center, Elefsina: 13/10/10; Declaration of Executive Committee of PAME, Athens: 13/10/10; «Θάφτηκε στα απόβλητα 29χρονος εργάτης», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 9558, p. 15, 22/08/06.

<sup>7</sup> 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 44, 66.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 58, 78; The production of the company increased from 196.000 tons in 2009 to 231.000 in 2010 and 266.000 tons in 2011. Resolution of the General Assembly of the *Hellenic Steel's* trade union «*H ENOHTHA*», Aspropyrgos: 15/11/11; «Εργαζόμενοι Χαλυβουργίας Ελλάδας: Αποφάσισαν απεργία διαρκείας», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11101, p. 17, 02/11/11.

<sup>9</sup> Resolution of the General Assembly of the *Hellenic Steel's* trade-union «*H ENOHTHA*», Aspropyrgos: 15/11/11 and 30/11/11.

<sup>10</sup> 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 68-69, 71-72; *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, pp. 19-20, 22.

for an immediate strike in case of any dismissals.<sup>11</sup> So, when the first 18 dismissals occurred on the 31<sup>st</sup> October, a 48-hour strike was unanimously declared by a new General Assembly.<sup>12</sup> So a 48-hour strike started – that would eventually last 273 days.

During this 9-month-long strike, a total of 21 general assemblies were held (one every two weeks, more or less), where the course of the negotiations, the future of the strike, and other matters were openly discussed.<sup>13</sup> No employee was ever excluded from these assemblies, even if they belonged to the scabbing group created by the employer following the first months of the strike.

### *Organization:*

Throughout the strike, the main orientation of the union and a basic condition for the successful outcome of the struggle, in its view, was the daily mobilization of as many workers as possible. At first, the response was great. A lot of people, strikers and supporters, were at the front of the factory gates every day. Their numbers declined as months passed by, and the fatigue due to the long-term struggle increased. However, in moments of rising tension or in crucial events, solidarity and popular support re-ignited.

In order to be more effective in the long term, strikers organized teams with specific responsibilities. These groups were the Organization Team, the Guarding Team, the Food Committee, the Committee of Action & Propaganda, the Health and Safety Committee, the Dismissed Committee, the Women's Committee.<sup>14</sup>

The Organization Team's task was to plan the daily guarding shifts. The Guarding Team was responsible for the safekeeping of the facilities. In some cases, they prevented provocations against the strike. The workers, throughout the strike, never forbade an employee of the company to enter the factory, although they decided that the Guarding Team would accompany any officer or manager in order to avoid damages or thefts that could then be blamed on the strikers. Managers refused to enter the plant accompanied by

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<sup>11</sup> *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 19; 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 70-74.

<sup>12</sup> Resolution of the General Assembly of Hellenic Steel's trade-union «*Η ΕΝΟΤΗΤΑ*», Aspropyrgos: 31/10/11.

<sup>13</sup> *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 90-107; *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 21.

guarding workers and accused the strikers of barring them from entering.<sup>15</sup> The Food Committee was another important committee that was set up when livelihood problems started to become intense.

The country's working class embraced the strikers with an unprecedented wave of solidarity and aid was sent daily to the steelworkers. The Food Committee was responsible for receiving the aid and then for distributing it. The products of solidarity were distributed to every worker, even to those who were recruited in the company's scabbing mechanism.<sup>16</sup> The Committee tried to take into account the different needs of each employee (for example whether one was married or had children) in order to cover, as best as possible, the needs of the entire worker's family. The Committee of Action & Propaganda undertook one of the most complex tasks. They spoke in workplaces, factories, schools, universities and generally in every place they were called to in order to talk about their struggle. Most of them had been active members of the factory's trade union before the strike, so they had some, albeit small, union experience. That was important, because they had to explain the demands of the steelworkers to audiences which, in some cases, were sceptical or even hostile to their struggle. So, they had to be able to think fast, to avoid pitfalls and to explain their cause in an understandable and convincing way. The Health and Safety Committee was responsible for keeping the factory's facilities clean during the day.

Another important committee was the Women's Strike Committee. It started as a supporting team for their husbands' struggle, but month after month it upgraded its activities and role. Indeed, the Women's Strike Committee managed to turn the factory's yard into a meeting point for people who lived in the area and a special playground for the children. Also, as the strike continued, problems began to accumulate regarding family expenses, bills, rents and debts.<sup>17</sup> So, the Committee started intervening with the various agencies (such as the electric or water companies) trying to gain favourable terms for the steelworkers. The results of this action were admirable in many cases. It is no exaggeration to say that without the efforts of these women the strike might not have lasted that long. In addition, they filled their husbands with courage, especially when the fatigue from the many months of struggle became apparent.

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<sup>15</sup> 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 90-91, 135-137.

<sup>16</sup> Chasapopoulos, Nick, «ΠΑΜΕ για διάσπαση στη Χαλυβουργία», *Το Βήμα*, 24/03/2012.

<sup>17</sup> *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, pp. 21, 34-35, 42-44, 46, 60, 76-77, 89; «Χριστούγεννα στη Χαλυβουργία με τα παιδιά τους», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n.11135, p. 11, 13/12/11.

The Dismissals Committee was formed during the second month of the strike, when dismissals began to multiply (exceeding 50 workers). The Administrative Council set up this committee because it wanted the fired workers to remain active next to their colleagues. The issue of workers' unity remained crucial throughout the strike. The strikers tried to strengthen this bond, while the employers did everything they could to undermine and break it.

### *Negotiations and manoeuvres*

Of course, while dealing with the practical requirements of organizing their strike, workers were also looking for a solution to their situation. At first, they looked to the tripartite meetings between the government, the company and the employees, for such a solution.<sup>18</sup> However, when these meetings proved fruitless by the end of 2011, the strikers focused their efforts in convincing their colleagues at the Volos factory to also go on strike. For that reason, they organized many delegations to the Volos factory and city. Nevertheless, they encountered significant difficulties in their objective, since the Volos factory trade union was under the leadership of DAKE (a trade union faction influenced by the liberal ruling party New Democracy – ND) and it was in direct dealings with the employer himself. With the help of the police, the Volos factory trade union prevented the strikers from even approaching the workplace and discussing with other steelworkers.<sup>19</sup> For many strikers in Aspropyrgos the non-participation of the Volos factory in the strike was a decisive factor for the final outcome of the struggle, because that allowed the employer to keep production going.

The steelworkers also tried to mobilize the workers of the largest metallurgical plants located in the surrounding area of Aspropyrgos. Nevertheless, they failed in that goal too, as the workers were afraid to risk their jobs by participating in a supportive strike.

### **Solidarity. The contribution of PAME & KKE**

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<sup>18</sup> At the first three months of the strike, four different tripartite meetings took place at the Ministry of Labour, on 9/11/11, 18/11/11, 21/12/11 and 3/01/12.

<sup>19</sup> «Στάση εργασίας από τους Μεταλλεργάτες», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11121, p. 9, 25/11/11; 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 170-175.

The endurance of the strike, apart from the determination of the workers and good organization, was due to an unprecedented wave of solidarity. The whole local community of the area of Aspropyrgos actively supported the strike. But even beyond the boundaries of the local community, thousands of people supported the steelworkers nationwide throughout this period, either individually or collectively through their unions.<sup>20</sup> Their solidarity was expressed in every way by people of all kinds, workers, farmers, university and high school students and unemployed, with money, food, or keeping guard outside the plant alongside its workers. At this point it is very important to underline that the strike began at a period when the first austerity measures had already been adopted in the country. Gradually, that led to the rise of the degree of the organization of the mass movement. More strikes, demonstrations and trade unions' actions, with the participation of much more people and sometimes more violent than in the past, were creating a relative degree of radicalization, an effort of the people to defend their rights against the austerity policies. This played a role in how the strike was perceived. Common people would see in the faces of the steelworkers a piece of themselves during the difficult years of the economic crisis. And steelworkers themselves would constantly strive for the generalization of their struggle, pointing at its wider significance. As their most popular motto read: "Make the whole Greece one Hellenic Steel."

After a few weeks, the strike became more widely known in Greece, as well as in Europe and the world. During the strike, more than 40 solidarity events were organized by unions nationwide, mainly by PAME [trades unions federation] and the unions that supported it.<sup>21</sup> Major such events were organized in Christmas of 2011 and Easter of 2012, when crowds celebrated these days together with the strikers in the factory. Another major such event occurred during the May Day demonstration organized outside of the gates of the factory.<sup>22</sup>

Fundamental in all of these was PAME's campaign to spread awareness of the strikers' struggle and demands – as did many other trades unions. Although the solidarity was wider and not limited to the actions of PAME, the front played a decisive role in the organization of the solidarity. Pivotal was the role of the Communist Party of Greece, whose newspaper and radio had daily reports on the strike. On the contrary, the rest of the mass media reported on the issue only from time to time, portraying the steelworkers as the ones

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<sup>20</sup> Resolution of the General Assembly of the *Hellenic Steel's* trade-union «*H ENOTHTA*», Aspropyrgos: 04/12/11.

<sup>21</sup> *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, 2012, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> «Χιλιάδες εργάτες έσμιξαν με τους απεργούς Χαλυβουργούς», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11246, p. 20, 02/05/12.

responsible for the deadlock. According to them, the workers did not realize the difficulty of the moment and demanded too much. As time went by, they started talking more and more about a communist-led strike aiming at creating social and political unrest. In some cases, they even called for the government to take more drastic measures to “put an end to the hostage situation imposed on the workers who wanted to work”.<sup>23</sup>

### **Two different strategies in the trade union movement**

The strike in the Hellenic Steel factory was not only a conflict between employers and workers but also a conflict between the different currents in the Greek labour movement. One of them followed a strategy of supporting the government’s policy in the years of crisis. Its advocates argued that all employees should help in those difficult times of crisis and not make “excessive demands”. They argued that this was not the right period for strikes and “maximalist” demands.<sup>24</sup> The trade unionists that advocated this strategy had connections and organizational ties with the liberal-right party ND and the Social Democratic Party, PASOK. They usually did not favour nor participate in mass labour processes, but they did have the control of the largest trade union federations in Greece as well as the General Greek Confederation of Labour (GSEE), by using various methods of state incorporation, collaboration with the industrialists, and even election fraud.

Opposed to that strategy, which was considered to be against workers’ interests, were the unions that adhered to the principles and struggle framework of PAME. PAME is a class-orientated militant front of the trades unions movement in Greece, with substantial strength in a number of cities with large working class concentration (such as Athens and Piraeus), as well as certain parts of industry.

Contrary to PAME, which helped the steelworkers’ strike from day one, the General Greek Confederation of Labour and the Metal Federation opposed and undermined the strike.<sup>25</sup> Not directly, but indirectly, accusing the workers of being unwilling to compromise or characterizing their strike as party-instigated, turning the workers into hostages for political

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.skai.gr/news/greece/gia-tromokratia-kataggellei-to-pame-ergazomenos-sti-xalyvourgia> ; Chasapopoulos, Nick, «Ο ανένδοτος οδηγεί σε λουκέτο τη Χαλυβουργία», Το Βήμα, 15/07/12, <https://www.tovima.gr/2012/07/15/finance/o-anendotos-odigei-se-loyketo-ti-xalyboyrgia/>.

<sup>24</sup> *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, ibid, p. 271.

<sup>25</sup> The General Greek Confederation (GSEE) refers, during these 273 days, only two times to the strike with official declarations. **F**irst during December against the dismissals and **t**he second after the intervention of the police inside the factory in July. No other effort to support the strike was attempted by the GSEE leaders, who condemned the intransigence of the strikers to the newspapers and to their interviews.



purposes. The workers could not count on the support of their federation, which, during the whole nine months of their struggle carried out only one 24-hour solidarity strike in the area of Aspropyrgus, under pressure from other unions.<sup>26</sup>

The strikers did, however, have widespread support from dozens of trades unions, many of which not affiliated to PAME, or of PAME majority.

### **The opponent**

Throughout the strike there was tremendous intransigence shown by the employer. One of the main reasons for this was that the factory indeed had to forego these reductions in wages and personnel in order to continue to operate with profit under market conditions. The company's Board of Directors had already intensified production to a maximum, at a time when they had new orders, because they knew that later on, they would enter in a new situation where production would decrease. Nowadays, ten years later, with all other Greek steel companies closed, we can conclude that, since then, the international division of labour had changed unfavourably for the Greek metallurgical industry and Hellenic Steel was the first victim of that change.

So, the employer tried to deal with the strike by going to extremes on the conflict. In the first period, every week, and then every month, new dismissals were added, reaching eventually some 180.

His second aim was to divide the workers. The culmination of this tactic came on 21 December 2011. In one of the many tripartite meetings at the Ministry of Labour, the employer, while promising to cancel the reduced working hours and the wage cuts, at the same time refused to take back the dismissed workers, hoping to create a crack in the unity amongst workers.<sup>27</sup> When the General Assembly asked for the return of the dismissed, the employer withdrew his proposal altogether and refused to meet with the employees again, accusing them of intransigence. From that point onwards, he began to set up the scabbing mechanism.

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<sup>26</sup> Ριζοσπάστης, n.11135, p.11, 13/12/11; Statement of the President of Metal Federation (POEM), Giannis Stefanopoulos, 12/2011; Interview with Charis Manolis, member of the trade-union of the factory and responsible for the Health Committee, <https://alterthess.gr/mia-synenteyxi-sti-chalyvoyrgia/>.

<sup>27</sup> Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012, *ibid*, p. 45.

The scabbing group numbered about 20 people for as long as the strike continued. Its leading team consisted of 3-4 members, one manager of the company, a female telephonist who was a member of ND and one canteen employee. None of them was in the production line. The group of scabs appeared every day in front of the factory's gate attempting to create trouble and to provoke incidents that would justify an intervention by the police.<sup>28</sup> They also filed numerous lawsuits against workers. These lawsuits were filed alternately by the same people against the same people, with the same accusations, in a copy-paste manner (they even had the same spelling mistakes).<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of 2012, a more organized attack by the company began. The official announcements made by the company talked about a group of trade-unionists who wanted to close down the factory and were using the strike as a weapon for that end. They also portrayed the strike as a partisan action guided by the communists, who kept the factory closed against the will of the vast majority of the workers who wanted to work.<sup>30</sup> The same arguments appeared simultaneously in the press and the other media, in different sites on the internet, made by GSEE executives or the scab group, giving the impression of a coordinated attack – as it probably was.<sup>31</sup> All of them tried to cultivate the false impression that a small portion of 50-60 workers were terrorizing the majority. At the same time General Assemblies were held in the factory almost every other week with the participation of 100-200 employees.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, however, none of the above-mentioned tactics paid off. So, nine months later, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, at 4 am, police forces surrounded the factory by order of the Prime Minister

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<sup>28</sup> «Απάντησαν με ασάβληνη ενότιητα στην επίθεση της εργοδοσίας», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11258, p.15, 16/05/12; «Απεργούν εδώ και 200 μέρες», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11259, p. 21, 17/05/12; «Η επίθεση στους απεργούς ξεσήκωσε την οργή εργατών από κάθε κλάδο», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11275, p. 19, 07/06/12; «Οργανωμένο και τραμπούκικο χτύπημα της εργοδοσίας», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11288, p.3, 22/06/12; Declaration of the Administrative Council of the *Hellenic Steel's* trade-union «*H ENOTHTA*», 21/06/12.

<sup>29</sup> Sifonios, George (Trade-Union's President), Speech at General Assembly of the metalworkers, Aspropyrgos: 17/05/12; 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 193-205, 211-214.

<sup>30</sup> Statement of the scabbing group, called as "Steelworkers' committee", 09/12/12 and 21/07/2012;

<sup>31</sup> Samaras, Antonis (leader of New Democracy, Prime Minister), Speech to the National Electoral Conference of the party of New Democracy, 26/05/12; Tsitsas Nick, Nanos Kostas, Apostolou Makis, «Το μάθημα της Cosco και το πάθημα της Χαλυβουργίας», *Έθνος της Κυριακής*, pp. 22-25, 15/07/12; *Καθημερινή*, n. 28107, 12/07/12; Chasapopoulos, Nick, «Ο ανένδοτος οδηγεί σε λουκέτο τη Χαλυβουργία», *Το Βήμα*, 15/07/12, <https://www.tovima.gr/2012/07/15/finance/o-anendotos-odigei-se-loyketo-ti-xalyboyrgia/> ; «Γιατί πάγωσε η τσιμινιέρα της Χαλυβουργίας», *Πρώτο Θέμα*, 17/07/12, <https://www.protothema.gr/economy/article/211018/giati-pagose-h-tsimini-era-ths-xalyboyrgias/> .

<sup>32</sup> It is characteristic that on 28/05/2012, seven months after the beginning of the strike, at another general assembly, the question about the continuation or not of the strike was posed to a secret voting. The final results were 204 votes in favour of the strike and 42 against. *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών*, *Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 106.

of Greece himself,<sup>33</sup> arresting the workers that were on guard on that day. Clashes between the police and supporters of the strike, who immediately gathered there, also broke out. Despite that and the fact that the police remained in the facilities, the strike lasted one more week.<sup>34</sup> There were three General Assembly meetings held in that week and on July 28<sup>th</sup> the steel workers finally decided to suspend the strike following a proposal made by the Administrative Council. The factory's management demanded that the steelworkers enter the workplace one by one, after being body searched and forced to show their identity cards to the police forces. The steelworkers rejected those demands and stated that they would enter the factory all together and only after all police forces had been removed from the premises, which finally happened.

## Conclusions

The steelworkers' 9-month-long struggle did not bring to the workers the expected results. The anti-labour measures were implemented, and there were more than 200 redundancies. However, in those 273 days of struggle most workers remained united. The wave of solidarity and support to the strikers was unique in the history of the Greek labour movement. What was extremely special was not only the qualitative characteristics of that solidarity but also its duration. After the first few months, the daily maintenance of the families was the result of this wave of solidarity. The fatigue expressed did not come about as a result of the struggle, but mainly as a consequence of not obtaining any solution, of the prolonging of an unchanging situation for months.

The strike also shown the various tools and methods used by the employers to create division between the employees who worked in different units and departments. The scabbing group was set up by people who did not work in the production line but took

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<sup>33</sup> Antonis Samaras elected Prime Minister few days before the intervention of the police. He had stated before the elections: *"A person who violates somebody's right to work cannot be called a trade-unionist [...] That person is not a trade-unionist, he is a tyrant, a dictator [...] Law and order will prevail"*. Speech of Antonis Samaras at Lavrio 01/05/12. Furthermore, after intervention of the police, he stated: *"We showed in the courtyard of "Hellenic Steel" that we mean what we say. A group of trade unionists had shut down a factory for months, blocking those who wanted to work and leading to the unemployment of hundreds of workers. The factory was going to close. We stopped that"*. Speech to the parliamentary group of New Democracy, 24/07/12; Ravanos, Aris, «Μήνυμα Σαμαρά σε Αριστερά-συνδικαλιστές η παρέμβαση στη Χαλυβουργία, *To Βήμα*, 30/07/12, <https://www.tovima.gr/2012/07/20/politics/minyima-samara-se-aristera-syndikalistes-i-parembasi-sti-xalyboyrgia/>.

<sup>34</sup> In the General Assembly of the next day (21/7) out of the factory (the gates were blocked by the police forces), the strikers decided to continue the strike with 164 votes in favour and only 5 against.

advantage of the strikers' weakness to divide them. The role of the state and the courts as defenders of the interests of the bourgeoisie was also highlighted. The protagonists of the strike have been dragged to court for years (until two years ago) in an effort, not only to punish them, but also to set an example for others in the future.

Of course, nothing was able to put a stop to the de-industrialization of that sector in the country. Today, both factories, in Aspropyrgos and in Volos (where the workers accepted the anti-labour changes from day one), are closed. The same thing happened to all the big steel factories in the country. Looking at things today, a decade later, we can assume that the strikers' struggle was a difficult one to win, since, due to the changes in the international division of labour, the shrinkage of the steel industry and the shift of the industrialists to other more profitable businesses was a strategic choice. Nevertheless, back in 2012, if the strike had spread to the factory in Volos, as well as the other large factories in Aspropyrgos, then surely it would have been fought under better terms.

In any case, the final outcome of the strike showed the limits of economic struggle itself. The bargaining power of a strike derives from its impact upon the surplus value extracted by the employer. If the employer doesn't gain from continuing production, then a strike cannot be as effective as a means of putting pressure on him.

Despite the outcome, the different stance of the workers in the two factories in Athens and Volos was unbreakably linked to the different orientation, strategies and generally the role of the two different trades unions. In the case of the Aspropyrgos trade union, the majority of the Administrative Workers' Council was trying to prepare and mobilize the workers before the crisis on every issue that concerned them. Its actions were upgraded shortly before the strike due to the tragic death of a worker, but it did have the "grounds" for such an intensification of struggle. On the contrary, the Volos factory trade union was effectively controlled by the employer. Its Administrative Council subordinated workers' needs to the employer's interests. The employer controlled the employees through the trade union and connections with local institutions and political figures of the local community. The attitude of the GSEE and the Metal Federation majorities points out that a trade union's victory, a workers' victory in the economic struggle, is much more difficult to be accomplished if there is no change in workers' orientation vis-a-vis the degenerate and compromised trade union leaders whose practice is class cooperation and not class struggle.

Finally, one last remark. The strike ended unsuccessfully for the workers, the dismissals were not cancelled and the factories in both Athens and Volos finally closed. So, what's the gain? Why was that strike so important? I'd point out two things. The first is that a new generation of workers who struggle today in the workplace may draw inspiration from that struggle. Due to the nation-wide dissemination of the strike, many lessons could be learned on how a strike can be organized, how to organize popular solidarity, etc. Several victorious contemporary strikes are the best proof of that – such as the most recent strikes in Cosco's dockworkers or efood delivery workers have shown. Another lesson can be described better by an incident that occurred during the last General Assembly of the steel workers in Aspropyrgos. There, many fired strikers voted in favour of suspending the strike so that their colleagues could work, while at the same time many workers voted against the suspension until the dismissed workers returned. This, the sacrifice for your fellow worker, this class solidarity is perhaps the most important lesson strikers taught in their 9-month-long fight.

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