



Of steel and strawberries: Greek workers struggle against informal and flexible working arrangements during the crisis



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ABSTRACT

This paper studies workers' resistance to the spread of informal and flexible employment patterns in Greece during the ongoing economic crisis. It focuses upon the spatial aspects of two strikes, the first by immigrant agricultural workers employed in the strawberry fields of Nea Manolada, in the Peloponnese region, and the second by steelworkers employed at the Hellenic Steelworks SA in Aspropyrgos, in the Attica region. The paper analyses workers' agency in both these cases, viewing it as a relational phenomenon strongly determined by the economic specificities of the sector to which workers' employers belonged, by the workers' ability (or not) to develop trans-local networks of solidarity and by the timing of the two struggles. We view the paper as a contribution to the growing body of Labour Geography research in two ways: (i) it speaks to how to theorise worker agency in a more nuanced manner; and (ii) it argues that, rather than viewing workers as simply social actors who are caught up in labour markets that are assumed to be structured by the actions of capital and the state (as per much economic theory), workers can actually play important roles in shaping how labour markets function and in resisting the tendency for precarious employment relations to spread across them.

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A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.
[‘The Last Station’, George Seferis, 1944.]

Introduction

Something, it is alleged, is seriously awry with capitalist labour markets in many parts of the world (Harvey, 2006; Michael-Matsas, 2010; Berberoglu, 2011). Nowhere does this appear to be more so than in the crisis-ridden countries of southern Europe – principally Italy, Spain, Portugal, and, most of all, Greece – which have been presented by much of the world's commentariat as the posterchildren for economic dysfunctionality and which have been vilified for their supposed initiative-stifling employee protections, tolerance of corruption, too much public spending and massive tax evasion (Selçuk and Yilmaz, 2011). The principal problem with these countries' labour markets, at least according to myriad European Union (EU) and other ‘experts’, is the various ‘rigidities’ which have been built into them.

Even before the present crisis materialised in 2008 the ‘problem’ of ‘excessive’ worker protections against dismissal was a meme which had become popular amongst critics of the welfare state forms of economic organisation that emerged across much of Europe after World War II. Beginning in the 1990s, policy makers within the European Commission had begun to assault welfare statism in the southern EU by warning the region's governments that they should follow pan-European trends and provide for a less-strict regulatory and administrative framework, one which would enhance ‘flexicurity’ in the region's labour markets (EC, 2008, 2009). A neologism coined by the social democratic Danish Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, the term flexicurity refers to a body of practices that are designed to encourage labour market flexibility but without reducing social protections for workers. It is viewed by its advocates as a way to preserve the EU social model whilst also improving competitiveness. Flexicurity, then, has been presented as a solution to economic crisis and stagnation because, it is argued by many in Brussels, it is the ‘limited availability’ of flexible and atypical employment, together with ‘undue’ protections against employee dismissals, that have been the central factors causing labour

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market rigidity and thus persistent unemployment in the southern EU.

Although some southern EU governments did, in fact, make moves towards implementing flexicurity prior to the crisis, their efforts have largely been condemned by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as not having been implemented forcefully enough because of elected officials' unwillingness to make 'tough economic decisions'. The result of such a narrative of political cowardice has been that the rather painful consequences that the contemporary crisis is having upon southern EU countries have been widely represented as inevitable outcomes flowing from poor policy choices. Consequently, the crisis and its attendant capital restructuring have been particularised, viewed as the outcome of local conditions and decisions rather than as perhaps the manifestation of deeper structural problems within global capitalism (Sakellaropoulos, 2010; Shaikh, 2011; Mavroudeas, 2013).

However, if we put the crisis within the broader context of the global restructuring of capitalism, two important things become evident. First, terms such as 'flexible employment' take on quite different meanings in diverse socio-economic contexts and thus, if implemented, may have quite different outcomes in different places. What may work at the northern economic core of the EU may not work in its southern periphery. Second, work and workplace restructuring is inherently a socio-spatial process, one strongly influenced by employers' will and workers' agency, which are themselves shaped by socio-spatial context. These often-neglected facts are important when considering the peculiarities of southern European labour markets and the unequal power relations and institutional forces therein (Peck, 1996; Hadjimichalis, 2011).

During the past three decades or so, the liberalisation and deregulation/re-regulation of labour markets have been closely associated with the new imperatives of accumulation, increasing competition, and the rise of new technologies enabling complex geographic rearrangements of production and exchange (McGrath-Champ, 1999; Harvey, 2006; Mavroudeas and Papadatos, 2012). The increased mobility of financial capital has also been seen as an important contributing factor (Hudson, 2002). However, in many studies of labour market restructuring which draw upon neo-classical economics and even many Marxist approaches (e.g., Kalleberg, 2003; Selçuk and Yilmaz, 2011), labour has generally been conceived of as a passive actor – labour market restructuring is seen to happen to workers. It was only at the end of the 1990s, with the emergence of the nascent field of Labour Geography, that geographers really began to explore both theoretically and empirically how labour itself can shape labour markets, either proactively or through its reaction to the actions of capital (Peck, 1996; Herod, 2001, 2010; Lie, 2007; Mitchell, 2011).

Our paper, then, aims to contribute to efforts to understand workers' roles in reshaping local labour markets by adopting a spatially informed perspective to study workers' struggles to resist the spread of precarious employment and the implementation of austerity measures in Greece. Greece has a rich history of workers opposing capital's interests, both through trade union collective action and through other, less formal, yet equally important, means (Leontidou, 1990, 1993; Gialis, 2014). Given this, here we examine the spatial strategies adopted by two groups of workers as they have challenged employer efforts to undermine worker protections as a way to 'solve' the crisis. The first group are immigrant agricultural workers engaged in the strawberry fields of Nea Manolada, a community in the Peloponnese region of southern Greece, about 260 km west of Athens. The second group are steelworkers employed by Hellenic Steelworks SA (*Hellenic Halyvourgia SA*) in Aspropyrgos, only a few kilometres from Athens, in the

region of Attica. The study draws upon interviews with key informants and other secondary material.¹

Whereas many studies conducted under the banner of Labour Geography have focused upon successful worker struggles, below we look at worker collective action in a context of both success and defeat. We do so as a way to examine labour agency as a relational phenomenon, one strongly shaped by the capitalist interests that workers must confront and the economic specificities of the sector to which their firm belongs. We also seek to explore the effects of multi-scalar levels of solidarity on workers' practice. The failure of the steelworkers to form a local-to-local tie between the two different cities in Greece where their firm had branches, despite several efforts to do so, is theorised as a loss of the 'upscaling advantage' which is often seen as key to spreading local disputes. By way of contrast, the strawberry workers were able to develop upscaling to their advantage. Part of the reason for this, we argue, is the impact of sectoral specificities, temporality and timing (Castree, 2007) on both disputes, with these being more helpful in the latter than in the former case.

The paper is structured as follows. First we provide a brief discussion of some questions related to worker agency that have emerged within Labour Geography, together with an indication of how this paper contributes to furthering debate. Next, we outline competing explanations of the cause of the Greek crisis, along with some recent data showing how it has impacted production, employment and worker agency. We do this to contextualise the two disputes. We then present the empirical findings for the two struggles studied. In the final two sections we discuss these findings and make some tentative conclusions.

Labour Geography: expanding the conversation over worker agency²

Labour Geography has made a strong claim to viewing workers as active agents in producing the economic geography of capitalism (Castree, 2007; Herod, 2010, 2012). One aspect of this has been a focus upon the spatiality of particular worker struggles (for an overview, see Herod, 2014). A central theme in many studies has been that of how workers have tried to 'upscale' disputes and the implications this has had for the relationship between different places.³ Thus, numerous studies have detailed local actions for either local (e.g., place-based campaigns) or non-local (e.g., consumer boycotts against labour practices in other places) purposes, whilst many others have examined how workers in different places have unified across space in trans-spatial activities to secure common goals, as in the case of inter-regional or global union campaigns (Tufts and Savage, 2009; Mitchell, 2011).

¹ The material used here was gathered as part of an ongoing post-doctoral research project on 'flexicurity' and atypical employment in the southern EU. Data gathering involved a mix of methods, including in-depth interviews and analysis of secondary material. The interviews were carried out by the first author between September and November 2011 and November and December 2012. Fourteen (14) key informants were interviewed, of whom seven (7) were related to the steelworkers' struggle and seven (7) to the strawberry workers' case. Four (4) of the interviews in each case were conducted with workers, either unionised or not. In the steelworkers' case, a unionist from the plant in Volos was interviewed. Other interviews were carried out with supervisors or company owners (but only for the steelworkers case, as employers in Manolada were unwilling to speak), unionists, and solidarity actors. Also, the first author participated in many solidarity gatherings in order to observe and record the beliefs and reactions of the participants. All of the interview material collected has been enriched with findings coming from an extended analysis of secondary sources (e.g., articles in newspapers).

² The historical development of Labour Geography has been covered in several comprehensive reviews, including Castree (2007), Herod (2010) and Lie (2007). Thus, we do not feel the need for an extensive recap here.

³ It should also be noted that 'downscaling' has also been a focus of interest by some authors (Herod, 2014).

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